

WEAR MY LOVE PROUDLY

Life in Atlanta was pleasant. The owner of the photographing studio in which Margaret Hall did her charming portraits of children was her very good friend. And outside the studio, Steve Andrews was her friend—and Steve wanted to bring Margaret into his own close circle, the privileged ones to whom life had always been kind.

But when Steve revealed himself as much more than a friend—as a man who wanted to be her husband—Margaret found herself running away again. It had become a pattern with her—thus running away. It was as though the accident that had taken away her parents and had left the livid scar on Margaret's throat—the scar that was the only thing she could see when she looked in the mirror, missing her own bright beauty—had made a coward of her.

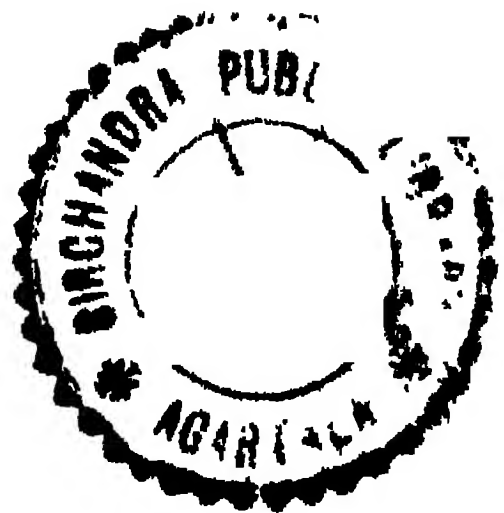
Aid, this time, believing that she had nothing to offer any man—and especially Steve—Margaret, after a brief visit with her aunt and uncle in Connecticut, found temporary asylum in Virginia . . .

Also by Laura Saunders
STRANGE EXILE

WEAR MY LOVE PROUDLY

by
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CHAPTER ONE

It began just like an ordinary day. There was nothing to make it seem different. No small cloud marred the brilliance of the spring sunshine, no fleeting premonition occurred to warn Margaret or her mother or father. As usual on Saturday, Mr. Hall took the early train to the city, promising to be back in time to give Margaret a driving lesson. Margaret and her mother spent half the morning in a friendly argument over what she should wear to the Senior Prom.

She was young to be graduating. Most of her classmates were seventeen and eighteen. But Margaret had moved up a grade, to graduate with a class ahead of her own. The Prom was to be her first really big formal party. And, she argued, it was important that she look older. In a sophisticated black dress, no one would suspect she was only sixteen.

Mrs. Hall admitted that with Margaret's red hair and fair skin black would look very well—in a few years, not now. Now she considered a cool sea-green far more suitable. They would leave it to Margaret's father to decide when he got home. Margaret had to agree, although she knew ahead of time he would side with her mother. He always did.

Actually she was too happy to care much. A tall, graceful girl with a smile of great sweetness, she had only yesterday been voted the prettiest girl of her class and one of those most likely to succeed. Last night Pete Peterson had asked for a date. That alone would make her the envy of every girl in school. And today her father was going to let her really drive the car, instead of just going round and round the block, starting and stopping and practising hand signals. He had promised. If there was one thing in life Margaret could be sure of it was her father's promises.

And today was no exception in that respect. He came home on schedule, grumbling amiably that he had to give up his Saturday afternoon golf and endanger his life by letting his overgrown, red-headed brat take him for a ride.

"In that case," his wife said, "I think I'll go with you."

"In what case?" Mr. Hall asked.

"If there are going to be lives endangered. Think how lonesome I'd be if neither of you came back."

"Oh, come now," Mr. Hall said. "Consider what a fascinating widow you'd be. With that figure of yours and all my insurance money . . ."

"You hush, Tom! I don't want your insurance money, and just leave my figure out of this. Besides, if you haven't any faith in our daughter's

driving, I have. It's a lovely day, anyway. I want to go just for the ride."

Mr Hall's resignation was exaggerated. "Well, come along, then. We'll have to take her, I guess, Peg, if her mind's made up." He took his wife's arm as they started out. "Have you made your will, my love?"

"Tom! Don't talk like that!" But Margaret's mother laughed as she said it. And her father laughed too. Years afterwards Margaret was to remember their laughter as they left the house that day.

She and her father walked slowly to the garage, while Mrs. Hall ran back to tell Eula what to do about the roast for dinner.

"What's this I hear about your wearing mourning to the Prom?" he asked.

"Not mourning, Dad! Black. Black is so—so adult."

"Ummmm," he said, eyeing the plaid shirt and jeans she was wearing. "I agree with you. Heartily. We'll make it green this time."

It was just what Margaret had expected, but she hadn't time to brood over it. She had already begun to feel a little edgy over the lesson. Not that she was really nervous; there were just such a lot of things to think of and remember.

Her father drove them out to the edge of town, and when they reached the quiet back road that wound north toward the New York State line, he

stopped the car and turned the wheel over to her. His steady stream of detailed instructions was interrupted by Mrs. Hall in the back seat.

"Now, Tom, you let her alone. Just relax, the way I'm doing."

Margaret glanced back and giggled. Her mother was sitting bolt upright, holding on to the door-handle like grim death.

"Keep your eyes on the road ahead," her father told her. "Never mind how funny your mother is. You should be used to her by now. And slow down—this is not a hot rod you're driving. You're going too fast."

Margaret slowed the car obediently. They were on a straight stretch of road, there was almost no traffic, and she was gaining confidence rapidly. Rolling away to the left were hills, mostly meadowland, but with clumps of trees showing the light sunny green of new leaves, and contrasting sharply with the blackness of the evergreens closer to the road. On the right, beyond the gravelled shoulder, was a sparse growth of low bushes still in their winter brown. Nothing could be seen on the other side of them, but Margaret knew there was a sheer drop to the river below and the farmlands it bordered.

Not that it was dangerous. The ground extended several feet beyond the shoulder of the road, she wasn't going too fast, and in any case her father was beside her. She saw with con-

siderable pride that he was feeling easier now, not watching her so closely, turning to talk to her mother in the back seat. Almost without realizing it, she pressed down on the accelerator, enjoying the feeling of power it gave her.

There was a slight curve ahead. Interrupting the story he was telling her mother, Mr. Hall cautioned her about it.

"Better slow down a bit, Peggy," he said. "You're getting pretty good at this, but don't be over-confident."

Margaret heard the pride in her father's voice, and she felt wonderful. Driving was easy. It was fun. It was really fun! This was what she'd always thought it would feel like. She wished Pete and Aggie and the rest of the gang could see her now!

She reached the curve quickly, a little too quickly, and pulled the wheel over. The car did not respond. It kept going, straight for the side of the road.

"Watch it, Peggy!" her father shouted at her, reaching for the brake. But the wheels had hit loose gravel and the sudden braking only made them slip sideways. Margaret turned the steering-wheel round and round, too frightened to realize there was no tension in it. It no longer seemed to be connected to the car.

Her father had his hands on the wheel now, pushing her into the corner, kicking her feet out

of the way to get his own on the pedals. But already the front of the car had crashed through the bushes, the hard branches whipping by them on either side, beating the car, scraping its sides, scratching Margaret's face and arm through the open window a second before they plunged. Her mother screamed. A high, shrill scream of pure terror—a scream that cut through Margaret's brain and left its echo there to come back again and again and again in the endless nights that followed.

They were falling. Pinned into the corner by her father's body, she knew the exact instant the rear wheels left the embankment, knew that they were no longer upright, that her father was no longer against her, knew that in reaching out blindly, instinctively, she had caught only the wheel which seemed to be pressing against her, hurting her, crushing her. But before she could cry out, there was the instant of blinding, sickening crash and it stopped. Everything stopped.

CHAPTER TWO

MARGARET dropped the newspaper to the floor beside the couch. She couldn't read any more. She could feel the tears crowding into her eyes and she wiped them away, wishing at the same time she could wipe away the ache inside her. What was the use of reading these things, anyway! Those weren't her children, those two whose grimy little faces peered hopefully back at her from the printed page. There was nothing she could do about them.

She glanced down. The paper had fallen so that the picture was hidden, but she could still see them—two sad, bewildered babies looking out on an angry world. A boy and a girl, the paper said; "aged two and three and a half", and the caption beneath it—"When Is Mama Coming Back?"

Calculated to pull at the heartstrings, the reporter had thought, no doubt. Well, it had. Maybe it was even calculated to bring back the strange woman who had walked out and left the children in a filthy flat where the police found them two days later—dirty, half-starved, and sick with their own crying for the woman who had borne them and who must have hated them very much. Crying for this woman because in their short lives she was all they had ever known.

Crying for the occasional food she must have given them, for the sound of a shrill, ugly voice because at least it was a human voice and the sound of it meant they wouldn't hurt so because they were so empty. The greater hunger—the hunger for love—was there too, Margaret thought. But they were too young to call it by its right name. How could they cry for something they had never known?

With a sudden violence, Margaret hoped the woman would not come back. Hoped she would never come back, and the babies would be cared for. Hoped that some day she would know what she had done. When her own arms ached with emptiness and there was no love for her anywhere, then she would know.

Margaret became aware that she was sitting upright, her whole body tense, her arms folded and drawn tightly against her. With a deliberate effort she relaxed, sinking against the back of the couch and letting her hands fall into her lap. This was crazy, getting so upset over two children whose mother had deserted them. Children were deserted all the time. Thousands of children were homeless, unloved by anyone. But me, she added bitterly, for all the good it does them! And as she thought it, she wondered if she were crying for them at all. Or whether she was crying for her own parents she had lost—or her own children she could never have.

Getting up from the couch, she picked up the paper and carried it out to the kitchenette, where she folded it once more and put it in the wastebasket. She wouldn't look at it again. She would go and comb her hair and see that all traces of the tears were gone so that she could be ready to smile when Steve came. It was eight-thirty; he would be here soon.

"Steve will be here." She said the words aloud, softly, liking the sound of them, the sound of his name and the rush of happiness the words brought.

As she re-entered the living-room, she heard footsteps in the hall and she paused, holding her breath, conscious of the pounding of her heart, of the blood that rushed to her cheeks and pulsed loudly in her ears. But the steps were too heavy, too deliberate. They were not the light, firm steps she listened for—steps that always quickened as they neared her door, expressing in themselves some part of her own eagerness to get the door open, to end the separation which became less bearable minute by minute. She waited motionless until the steps had passed her door and continued down the hall. Her breath came out in a long sigh.

Smiling wryly at her own foolishness, she crossed the living-room quickly and walked into her small dressing-room, flipping the light-switch as she entered. She stood back and surveyed as

much of herself as she could in the inadequate mirror.

Her black wool dress still looked fresh and unwrinkled, and the tears had left no trace as far as she could see. But she needed lipstick and her hair was untidy. She reached for the brush.

Margaret's greatest claim to beauty lay in her hair, curly hair of shimmering reddish-gold. It had been both a curse and a blessing to her. A curse because for years now she had suffered when strangers stared at her—and no matter how plainly she dressed, or how little care she took of herself, her tall, slim figure, topped by hair of such unusual beauty, was conspicuous wherever she went. Only lately had she considered it a blessing, because Steve loved it so. It was quite long, and whenever they spent the evening in her apartment, he liked to have her loosen the knot and let it cascade down her back to catch the gleam of light from the lamp, giving back to it some of its own bright warmth.

As Margaret brushed it, she remembered how pleased Steve had been the night they were sitting in front of the open fire and he had noticed that the small new flames dancing along the top of the log were the exact shade of her hair.

"It could only match something alive," he'd said then. "See how beautiful it is?"

After that she'd liked it better.

She paused, brush in hand, wondering whether

or not to let it hang down. She didn't know what Steve would want to do tonight. It was Friday, the end of the week for him. Sometimes they saw a show on Friday night. Better to have it up, she thought, just in case. She pulled it back, catching it up in a coil. The pearl earrings, matching the strand at her throat, looked pallid below it. Jet would have been better, But because for so many years she had paid no attention to her appearance, she didn't own the sort of things she would have liked to wear for Steve.

For so many years, particularly those first years after the accident, she hadn't cared how she dressed. She wanted only to hide. Dipping one finger in her box of powder, she placed it against the thin, pale line which started behind her left ear and ended in the small crease below her firm chin. That scar had been an ugly red wound once—reminding her of her burden of guilt, and killing in her own eyes any hope she might have had for beauty. Now, seven years later, it remained a wound only to Margaret, but she was suffering all over again. She would gladly have given another seven years of her life if she could have felt she was really beautiful for Steve.

But she'd lost so much more than beauty on that far-off spring day when her father's car had left the paved road to leap crazily over the embankment to the valley below. She closed her eyes, unable to face her own mirrored image as

the horror took hold of her once more. Less than a minute before, her father and mother had been alive, teasing her, laughing with her at her awkwardness. And then she'd killed them.

In the hospital, when she'd begged them to let her die too, they told her it wasn't her fault. They said the steering gear had gone wrong, that it would have happened no matter who was at the wheel. But she had never believed them. She knew better. Her father would have known what to do. He would have stopped the car, somehow.

Months later, when they released her from the hospital, there'd been no family. Just Margaret—the girl who had killed her parents. She'd lost a way of living that day—a life, really. The lonely existence she'd led since could hardly be counted. Except for her work. She really liked her work. And now—except for Steve.

Going into the living-room again, she looked at the clock. It was a pretty little clock, made of china with a spray of small blue flowers around its face and a lacy gilt edging. Its hands were slender gold arrows. Against her will, Margaret found herself watching them anxiously. As always when she waited for Steve, the clock seemed to be feeling its age. Certainly it slowed down, the hands barely creeping from one number to the next.

But despite its age and perversity, Margaret

liked the little clock. It was one of the few things in the apartment that belonged to her. She could remember it on the bedside table in her mother's room. As a child, she had fancied it was made especially for her dainty little mother—it matched her so perfectly.

It looked smaller than ever here in this long, high-ceilinged room, but not incongruous. The room and all its furnishings were old. In more prosperous times, when the house was a single residence, this was no doubt the master bedroom. Now it had the look of being left over from another era. But its marble fireplace, its tall windows opening out on the small balcony, its ill-matched but individually attractive furniture made it pleasant to live in. And from the centre of the high mantel the little clock presided over it, announcing the hour and half-hour musically if not always accurately.

Now it was twenty to nine. Steve wasn't usually as late as this. Margaret wondered if anything could have happened to him, and for the second that she thought it her heart seemed to stop altogether. But that was nonsense. Nothing had happened to him.

She sat quietly on the couch again, to wait for him. After all, he hadn't said exactly what time he'd come. And it didn't matter, really. So long as he was coming. So long as she had that to live for.

CHAPTER THREE

STEVE selected a plain maroon tie from the rack that hung on the inside of the opened closet door and stepped back to stand before the mirror of the ugly, old-fashioned dresser. One step in any direction took him to something—the bed, the closet door, the door to the bathroom, or the door to the hall. Not that he cared particularly. He liked the sensation of living on his own earnings, though he didn't minimize the value of having family money if he really needed it. If the room was small and overcrowded, it was also cheap. And he spent very little time here, except to sleep.

He whistled softly as he adjusted the knot in his tie. Freshly showered and shaved, and with an ample thirty minutes before he was due at Margaret's, he felt good. The work at the Lab had gone well today—no hitches, no mix-ups. Give him another few months and he'd have the right to call himself a real research man.

Working in the sales end of Prima Pharmaceuticals had bored him—despite his father's insistence that that was where the money was made. But now that he had gone back to his chemistry, to experimentation, he was content. Impatient as he sometimes felt, cramped and shut in by the delicate test equipment which surrounded him

and faced with a small, tedious job, it was still fascinating. He was learning to handle himself as he learned to handle the equipment.

Today, for instance, everything had been smooth as silk. And when they closed up at six and he stepped outside, with the first long breath of fresh air had come the thought of Margaret.

He paused, both hands motionless on his tie, as the implication of his own words reached him. Things had gone well. He hadn't thought of Margaret until the day was done. What he meant was he hadn't needed to think of Margaret. When things went wrong, he always thought about Margaret - about the things she'd said, her faith in him, her sureness that everything would work out just as he wanted it, if he'd only give it time. Sometimes he'd even pulled his wallet out of his pocket and sneaked a look at the snapshot of her he carried there. He'd taken it himself one Sunday in the park— Margaret standing straight and tall, her eyes on his, a little smile on her lips, her love for him plain even on that bit of glazed paper.

He felt warm and reassured even now, just thinking of it. But he felt more than a little sheepish too, remembering the many times he'd used it for just that purpose. What a baby he was! Break a test-tube, lose a couple of hours' work, and he'd run straight to mama!

She'd never failed him. Six years younger than he, slim and sure as a young goddess, with

that incredible flame-top of hers, in the months he had known her she'd never failed to be there when he needed her. Now, as he slipped his coat from the hanger and put it on, the memory of her long, graceful fingers clasping his, the velvet softness of her cheek and the yielding warmth of her when he held her close, drove everything else out of his mind.

Hastily he grabbed his keys and wallet from the dresser and stuffed them in his pockets. Reaching into the top drawer, he took out a fresh packet of cigarettes and a clean handkerchief. He picked up his watch, sliding the wrist band over his hand as he started for the door.

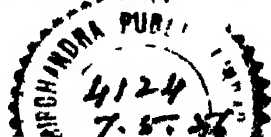
He had the door half-open and his finger on the light-switch when he heard the phone in the lower hall. He waited motionless, listening to it ring, listening to the clatter of heels on the bare floor as Mrs. Henley went to answer it. Evelyn had promised to call him about Saturday. Evelyn's promises being what they were, he hadn't been surprised when the week passed without hearing from her. But this was Friday night. It could be. If so, he'd rather talk in the upper hall, so he'd have at least the illusion of privacy.

"Mr. Andrews. Mr. Andrews!"

Steve stepped out into the hall. "Yes, Mrs. Henley."

"It's for you."

Steve sat in the rickety little chair beside the



small table which held the phone. He picked up the receiver.

"I have it, Mrs. Henley. Thank you," he called down. He waited until he heard the click and the sound of her retreating footsteps before he spoke into the phone.

"Hello," he said, bracing himself.

"Hello, Steve? It's Evelyn. How are you? I imagine you thought I had forgotten I said I'd call. It wasn't that. We've just been so busy this last week, you have no idea."

Reacting as always to the high, clear, artificially sweet voice, Steve thought how typical it was of her to ask a question and then betray her lack of interest by not waiting for an answer! But he was in no position to give vent to his irritation, or any other emotion she might arouse in him.

"I can imagine," he said, his tone formally polite. "How is Kenny?"

"Well, that's what I'm calling to tell you, Steve. He's had a little cold. It's been hanging on for several days now and——"

"Have you had a doctor? How's his temperature? Any fever?"

"Of course we've had a doctor, Steve! And he hasn't any fever now or anything, but we've been sort of keeping him quiet. Mother thought—that is, Mother and I both thought it might be better for him if you didn't take him out tomorrow."

Steve could feel himself growing tense: He tried to relax again, but the tightening throat-muscles thinned the tone of his voice, changed the shape of his carefully chosen words.

"All right," he said. "I'll just come over in the afternoon for a little while and sit with him."

"But I won't be here, Steve. Daddy's away and Mother—Mother is having some friends in. It—well, it might be awkward."

There was a pause. Then Steve tried again. "I wouldn't disturb them, Evelyn, if I were upstairs in Kenny's room. Is he in bed?"

"Well, no," she said quickly. "You see, that's it. If he is playing in the house, he might be anywhere. And Mother feels that it might be embarrassing—for you, too, Steve."

Steve could just bet! He knew from experience just how worried Mrs. Ransome would be about his possible embarrassment. His control slipped a little.

"Look here, Evelyn," he said, "there's no reason for anybody to be embarrassed. I'm Kenny's father, after all. I have a — It's natural that I should want to see him. And divorces don't embarrass people any more."

There was another pause, longer this time. When Evelyn spoke again, she sounded fainter, her voice coming from a great distance. "I'm sorry, Steve. I—I don't feel very well. I

haven't been very well lately. Maybe we can talk about this another time."

Steve gripped the phone tightly. He forced his voice back to normal. "Just a minute, Evelyn. There's no reason for you to get upset. I'm not trying to force anything. If I can't see Kenny tomorrow, when can I see him? How about Sunday? I might take him for a little ride—if he's better, that is." He knew as well as Evelyn that there was nothing wrong with Kenny, but he had to play along, hating himself for doing it, hating Evelyn even more for making it necessary.

There was no sound at the other end of the line.

"Evelyn!" he said sharply. "Evelyn, are you still there?"

"Yes, Steve, I'm here." He could barely hear her. "But I don't feel at all well. I—I think I'd better lie down. I'll call you next week and we can talk about it."

"But about Sunday, Evelyn?" he persisted. "What about my- ——" He could hear the click as she hung up the receiver. He sat there, holding the phone, the dial tone buzzing steadily into his ear. This was the third week in succession she had put him off. Kenny would think he had forgotten him.

He'd promised to take Kenny for a ride in the country, and to take him to see Margaret. The kid always had a wonderful time with Margaret. But he'd made so many promises, and each time

Evelyn had made it impossible for him to keep them. And what she might be telling Kenny, meanwhile, he didn't like to think.

What could you tell a five-year-old? It would be easy for them not to say anything, to let Kenny think his father's promises meant nothing, to let him think his father just didn't care. Steve cursed his own impotence, his stupidity that he had let such a situation develop. He'd beat it somehow. He'd show Evelyn! For once, she was not going to have everything her own way.

He realized suddenly that he was still sitting there, holding the buzzing telephone. He put it back on its cradle and got slowly to his feet. He was tired now. He would go to see Margaret. There was—there must be—some way out of this. Perhaps, if he and Margaret talked it over, they could think of something. In any case, he would see Margaret. He had to see her now.

As he started down the stairs, he glanced at his watch. He was late. It would be after nine before he got there.

CHAPTER FOUR

IF she were really intelligent, Margaret told herself, she would turn on the radio and listen to it. Or she would take this time to mend that tear she'd noticed in the hem of her grey skirt. But the thought of Steve immobilized her, held her rooted to a spot in full view of the little clock. Without looking at it now, she knew it was almost nine o'clock. She concentrated all her energies on not worrying.

Steve might have had to work later than usual. He might have fallen asleep when he got to his room. There were all sorts of perfectly harmless possibilities. He was a grown man, capable of taking care of himself. It was senseless of her to worry about him.

If she had to worry about something far better worry about her work. Being a photographer of children was not the least vexatious job in the world. Her small subjects were too often frightened, rebellious, and thoroughly intractable before she even started work on them. Dragged into the studio by determined parents, they faced her with an antagonism that took all her patience and kindness to overcome before they would pose at all. Like the little Elliott boy this afternoon.

Or, for that matter, like Kenny that first day Steve brought him in.

Margaret took a cigarette from the box on the mantel and dropped down on to the hassock beside the fireplace. Steve had been so helpless that day! At least he hadn't been resentful when she'd asked him to wait in the reception-room for his son. Many parents were, especially the mothers. But, as she'd explained to Mr. Satterlee, she got so much better results without the well-meaning interference of parents. And the reputation of Satterlee's Studios was built on results, after all.

She had never told Steve how she felt that first day when he walked in, holding Kenny by the hand. She hadn't expected Steve. She hadn't ever in her whole life expected anyone like Steve. Mary, the receptionist, had made the appointment for a Mr. Andrews who wanted photographs of his son, aged five. Just another parent with a natural desire to have his youngster's picture taken.

But Steve hadn't been just another parent. Even that first day, the date of the sitting, she had known he was much more than that. Every detail of that afternoon was sharp in her memory. She had been going over some proofs in the small office adjoining the reception-room when he walked in—a tall, serious young man with close-cut brown hair and a brooding expression in his

deep-set eyes, an expression which was to haunt her afterwards.

"Stephen Andrews," he said to Mary. "We had an appointment for two-thirty, I believe." He indicated the blond, chubby little boy who clung to his hand—a frightened little boy with his father's dark eyes and solemn expression.

"Yes, Mr. Andrews. If you'll wait, please. Miss Hall will be ready for you in just a moment."

"Miss Hall?" he repeated, his eyebrows raised questioningly. "We don't rate Mr. Satterlee?"

Margaret felt a slight amusement now, remembering Mary's icy reaction. "Your appointment was for photographs of your son, I believe, Mr. Andrews. Mr. Satterlee considers Miss Hall the best children's photographer in the South-east. However, if you prefer——"

"Oh, no. No," Steve said, his eyes narrowing slightly, the little quirk at the corners of his mouth suggesting the smile he repressed. "In that case, we'll consider ourselves fortunate to have Miss Hall, won't we, Son?" He led Kenny to the small settee and sat down beside him, picking up a magazine from the low table before him and opening it for the child to look at the pictures.

Margaret had stood for a moment, watching them, wishing she could get a candid shot of them as they sat there—father and son, their two heads together, the child's face eager and expressive, the man gravely answering his questions.

The sitting hadn't gone well that day. Even when Margaret sent Steve back to the reception-room, she couldn't rid herself of the peculiar feeling his presence, the sound of his voice, had caused. Despite the closed door between them, she continued to be intensely aware of him and, somehow, more acutely aware of everything else. It was as though his being there had sharpened all her senses—and destroyed her serenity. Young Kenny had been frightened by the strangeness of the room, the camera, the many lights. And having lost her own calm, she found it impossible to quiet him.

Later, when she told Steve she was not satisfied with the proofs and wanted to make an appointment for another sitting, she had felt bewildered by his reluctance to agree. It seemed such a simple thing to do, to bring the boy back for another try. She hadn't known then how hard it was for Steve to get his son, even for an afternoon.

"I'll see," Steve had said. "I'll speak to— to his mother about it and let you know."

He had sounded worried, almost afraid. But he didn't look like a man who would be afraid of anything, much less the mother of his son—his wife. Margaret had felt a sharp pang of—what? Disappointment? Chagrin that her work was not up to its usual standard? She tried to tell herself that was it. But in her heart she'd known better.

Even then she'd known that this man was far more important to her than just another job of work. Stephen Andrews. Presumably a happily married man with a little boy of his own. And when he'd gone, promising that he would call about the appointment, she hadn't been able to forget him. She would put him out of her mind during the day, only to wake at night thinking about him, wondering what sort of work he did, what his home was like, and—despite all she could do—what his wife was like.

Fortunately for her peace of mind, he did call later bringing Kenny back for another sitting. And this time the boy had been less frightened and the pictures were very good. This time, too, Steve had told her he and the child's mother were divorced, that the bill must be sent to his office. And when it was sent and he came in person to pay it, he had asked her to have dinner with him.

Of course Margaret knew now that he was lonely and unhappy and he had needed her. He still needed her, and she was grateful that she could help him. She neither asked nor expected that he would love her, ever, only that for a time at least she be permitted to love him.

Her cigarette had burned down as she held it, the ash dropping on the hearth beside her. She tossed it into the fire and looked up at the clock once more. Steve was really late; it was almost nine-fifteen.

He was driving. Perhaps there'd been an accident. Someone had crashed into his car. Perhaps at this moment they were taking him to a hospital. They wouldn't know about her. No one would call and let her know. She sat quite still, fighting down the sudden panic that threatened to take over, telling herself not to be ridiculous.

As soon as she could, she got to her feet and started for the telephone. She could call his rooming house. He'd given her the number. But before she reached the phone she heard him, heard the familiar, quickening steps as he came down the hall. She ran for the door, and flung it open to find him there, one hand lifted toward the knocker. Her relief and sudden happiness made her a little dizzy. Her arms went around him before he was really inside the apartment. "Oh, Steve!" she said, lifting her face to his. "Steve!"

He kissed her, holding her close. Then, one arm still around her, he reached back to close the door.

"Is this what I get for being late?" he asked in pleased surprise. "I'll have to do it often!"

"I—I was worried," Margaret said. "I was afraid something had happened."

"Something did," he said, his voice suddenly grim.

She looked at him closely, and realized that he looked tired. Together they walked back toward

the fire. "Here," she said, indicating the couch, "sit down."

Taking her hand, he tried to pull her down beside him.

"No," she said, putting the extra cushion on the arm of the couch. "Why don't you stretch out and really rest a little? I'll sit here." She pulled the hassock nearer the couch.

Steve accepted her suggestion promptly. With his head on the cushion and his feet crossed on the other arm of the couch, he grinned up at her.

"Can I get you a drink?" she asked.

"You, u . . ."

She smiled and nodded. Living so much of her life alone, she had never acquired a taste for whisky, and her knowledge of mixed drinks was severely limited. But she always mixed her own "drink" when she offered Steve one, even though he considered hers a joke.

"Fine," he said. "Just don't overdo it."

She had taken the tray of ice-cubes out earlier, and now it required only a minute to fill the glasses. She heard Steve moving as he reached over to the coffee-table for a cigarette. Presently he gave a deep sigh, and the little frown it brought to her forehead was still there when she walked back in with the drinks in either hand. He had said that something had happened. He would tell her about it, she hoped. Maybe there was something she could do

He watched her in silence as she set the drinks down on the glass top of the coffee-table. She could feel his eyes still on her when she put more wood on the fire, pushed the hassock a little nearer him and sat down to face him once more. He reached one hand out and she clasped it in her own.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," she said, smiling back at him.

The snap and crackle of the fire took over. Margaret could hear the little clock too, but she didn't mind it now. She didn't mind anything now, with Steve here. Sliding around on the hassock, she faced the fire, her back resting against that end of the couch near Steve's head. He turned on his side, pulling himself up into a half-sitting position. His hand was in her hair, his fingers exploring until he found the pins and pulled them out gently, one by one.

"Maggie," he said. "Flame-top. You're pretty wonderful, you know. Did you know you were?"

"No," she said lightly, tilting her head so that she could smile at him. "No, I didn't. Tell me about it."

But he didn't tell her. He was silent. And Margaret became aware that it was a different silence. She waited, bracing herself against this unknown something she could feel in the air.

"Maggie," Steve said quietly, not touching her now, "Maggie dear, will you marry me?"

CHAPTER FIVE

MARGARET held herself rigid, motionless, not daring to breathe until the clamour within her died down. She couldn't speak. She couldn't even form the necessary words inside her, much less utter them. The room swam hazily before her and she wondered if she might be fainting.

"Well?" Steve asked at last.

She turned toward him and saw that he was hurt by her silence. Momentarily her own turmoil was forgotten. Whatever happened, Steve must not be unhappy. It was unthinkable that she, of all people, should be the one to hurt him. She hesitated, stifling the impulse to touch him, to hold him, to deny with her hands what her dry, stiff lips were about to say. But it had to be said.

"No," she answered him, her hand going instead to the thin scar on her throat. "No, Steve, I can't marry you—ever."

As she spoke, she watched him anxiously, saw him whiten. But after one quick look his gaze shifted to the fire. He didn't look at her again. Instead, he got to his feet and walked over to fold his arm along the mantel and lean his head on them, staring down into the flames.

She hadn't told him about herself, about what happened to her that day of the accident. She

hadn't known, hadn't even dreamed that he loved her. She hadn't thought such a thing was faintly possible. What had she thought? That he was lonely, that he liked her, that perhaps he enjoyed having her love him. Surely he knew how much she loved him. She had never tried to hide it, wouldn't have known how if she'd wanted to. With the conviction that she deserved so little, she had been happy to pour out on Steve some part of that reservoir of love she had held back so long. But that he might be in love with her—it wasn't possible.

She must think of the right words now to make him understand. "Steve," she began mildly.

"Yes?" He raised his head from his arms, but he did not turn toward her.

"Steve, you know how much I love you. Don't you, Steve?"

He faced her then. He walked back to the couch and stood looking down at her gravely.

"I thought so," he said. "I thought I knew."

This time her hands went out to him, and dropping down beside her, he caught them in his own. She leaned toward him as she spoke—her eyes, the expression of her mouth, the yearning in every line of her body telling him far more than her words could.

"I do love you, Steve," she said. "Oh, my darling, I love you so very much! That's why I can't marry you, that's why I could never marry

you." Freeing her hands from his, she covered her face with them, unable to say any more.

In silence, he pulled her toward him, and she hadn't the strength left to resist. With his arm around her, she hid her face in his shoulder. But as her taut muscles relaxed, she began to shake.

He held her quietly, stroking her hair with his free hand. "There, now," he said softly. "It can't be that bad. Whatever it is, we'll work it out, darling, you'll see. You've been alone with it too long, that's all."

She heard him dimly, not listening to the words, but soothed by his voice, comforted by his nearness. Presently she was limp and quiet against him.

He continued to hold her, saying nothing, giving her the time she needed. Finally, with a long sigh, she pulled away from him and smiled—a wavery, uncertain little smile.

"There," Steve said. "That's better. You know, proposals are quite becoming to you. Your eyes are a sort of midnight blue and your cheeks are pretty and pink."

"Also my nose," she said.

"It's a nice, straight little nose," he declared, eyeing it judiciously. "I especially admire that light—er, scattering of freckles across it. Just the sort of nose I'd like a wife to have. But then—ah, well!" He sighed elaborately.

Despite the lightness of his tone, the last words

took Margaret's smile way. She had to tell him about it now. The whole thing. She swallowed hard and plunged.

"When you know about me, Steve, you'll feel differently. You see I—I got hurt. When I was sixteen, my father was teaching me to drive the car. He didn't want to, he thought I was too young, but for years he'd promised that when I was sixteen I could learn and so I—we, that is—went out on my birthday for my first lesson." The word were coming in a rush now. "I remember the day it happened was the first time my mother had gone with us. She insisted. She said—she said if—we were going out to kill ourselves she didn't want to be left alone. I remember we, my father and I, laughed at her. We always laughed a lot, we three. I remember how happy we were." Margaret's eyes widened with the pain of remembering.

"Don't tell me if you'd rather not, Maggie," Steve said, watching her anxiously.

"No, I want to. I must tell you. It's just that—that I've never really told anyone. I'll be all right." But she wasn't all right. It was all coming back. Every detail of that day was becoming vivid to her. It was the last really happy day she could remember. Her hands began to tremble and she clasped them tightly. But she kept going. And in the telling, she forgot Steve, forgot her reason for going back. She could feel

the warmth of that spring morning, remember the silly argument with her mother over a dress for the dance, remember the sounds of the Davids' rattly old lawn mower in the next yard, the buzz of Eula's vacuum cleaner. And how her father had fussed over missing his golf.

She had never touched the wheel of a car since, but she could remember how it felt, how pleased with herself she had been. She could see the curve ahead and feel once more that beginning of panic when she realized she should have slowed down. She could hear the crunch of the gravel under the tires when they left the road. And she could hear her mother's scream. Once more she had that awful sensation of falling, of the blackness—the whirling, whurring, hideous blackness that came just before the deadly quiet. She was lost in it.

Margaret opened her eyes to find her head against the back of the couch and Steve leaning over her. "Are you all right, Maggie? Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said faintly. "Yes, I'm all right."

"Don't go on with this, dearest. Skip it. It doesn't matter now. It was all years ago. Sit still now and rest."

She obeyed him while he hurried to the kitchenette and came back with a small glass of brandy. "Here, drink this first," he said. "Drink it down."

When she finished it, Steve took the glass and then sat beside her. "Don't let's talk about it any more," he said. "You can tell me another time, if you feel like it."

"No," she insisted, feeling slightly better, knowing she must finish, now that she had started. "I'm all right now, really. I won't do this again. That's most of it, anyway. That's the worst."

"I didn't know anything much for days, I guess. It was a long time before they told me my mother and father were both dead. They hadn't thought I'd live either." Her left hand went up to her throat. She rubbed the side of it as she talked. "They thought they were being kind, waiting like that until I was stronger. But after they told me what I'd done, I didn't want to live either. If they'd just told me earlier—I might not have."

Steve reached over, pulling her hand away from the scar, holding it. "Does any of this explain why you can't marry me?" he asked. "Have you given me a reason why I shouldn't take care of you now?"

"Yes, of course it does," she said. "I haven't finished, Steve. I didn't die with my parents, but it was close. It was months before I could leave the hospital, and even then, when my uncle and aunt came to get me, I didn't want to go with them. I didn't want to go on living. I didn't deserve to live. And by that time I knew how

little I had to live for. I had killed my mother and father. And the doctor told me that besides the breaks in my legs and the cuts on my face and neck, my hip bone—the socket, that is—was shattered. I could never have a baby. It was a—a kind of judgment against me.”

Margaret moved restlessly, turning a little away from him, staring into a space now peopled with her own hateful memories. Steve held tightly to her hand, his eyes never leaving her.

“When they let me out of the hospital, I went home with my uncle and aunt. The next year they made me go back and finish school. It was easier there, because it was a strange school. I didn’t know anybody. I didn’t want to know anybody. Because I knew then what I had to do. I had to go on living—but alone. Always alone.

“Aunt Helen offered to pay for another operation for me, to take the scar off my neck, but I wouldn’t let them do it. I wanted to go on being scarred and ugly. That was part of my punishment. And it would make things easier, in a way. I’d never be able to forget, even for a moment, that I was not like other people.”

She stopped. It seemed a long time before Steve spoke.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“All?”

“Is that the whole story?”

"Isn't it enough?"

"I can't see what it has to do with us."

"It has everything to do with us! I'm a cripple, Steve, even though it's inside, where it doesn't show." She pulled her hand free and with her fingertips traced the long scar again.

"That scar doesn't show either," Steve said. "Nobody'd ever see it, if you didn't keep pointing to it all the time."

Hastily Margaret dropped her hand into her lap.

"I've always known marriage was not for me," she said. "That's why I would never go out with men, even after the scars faded and I was not so repulsive."

"You were never repulsive!"

She only smiled.

"What about me?" he asked. "You gave me a date when I asked for it."

She lifted her eyes to his again. "You—you were different, Steve. I couldn't seem to help myself."

"You see," he said, "that proves it! You wouldn't even go out with anyone else, but you want to marry me. You do want to marry me, don't you?"

Margaret looked at him a long time, wordlessly. She leaned forward, pushing the hair back from his forehead, letting her hand trail down the side of his face, laying it against his cheek. He leaned

against it caressingly. And then, turning his head, he kissed the palm.

Margaret jumped to her feet, moving away from him, turning to face him only when she was out of reach.

"No, Steve. I can't marry you. When a woman really loves a man, she wants to give him everything in the world. Most of all, she wants to give him herself, to—to bear his children."

"Not all women."

"Most of them," she said. "It's instinctive, I guess—a part of loving. I could never offer you half a woman, loving you as I do."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

"I have a son, Margaret. I don't agree that all women feel like that, but it is true that most men want a son. I have a son. That part of me is satisfied. What I need is a wife. What I really need is you."

She held back. "Are you sure, Steve? Really sure?"

"Dead sure," he said. "Come here, Margaret."

It was so easy, then, to listen, to go and sit beside him and feel his kisses on her mouth and hear him say he loved her. With his arms around her, it didn't seem too hard to believe that everything would be all right, that all his bright prophecies would come true.

"Don't you see, darling, that in a way you would be giving me a son—just by marrying me? You would be giving me my own son. If I were married and had a real home where he could come and visit, the court would consent to it, I'm sure Evelyn asked for his custody and got it because I didn't fight. I couldn't, then. But now, with you to help me, it will be another story. And think how happy Kenny would be! He already loves you, Maggie. We both do. We would try to make you happy."

It wasn't fair, really. With Steve's arms around her and the vision of the little boy he conjured up for her, what could she say? She thought of the rare days the three of them had been together, how eagerly Kenny had responded to the love and attention she had given him, how happy he had seemed to be. At that moment, nothing Steve said seemed impossible, really. The misgivings didn't come back until later.

CHAPTER SIX

BUT if everything seemed simple and easy when Steve was with her, it became fantastic and impossible when Margaret was alone. Three times during the next few weeks she sat down to write her aunt that she was going to be married. Twice she got as far as, *Dear Aunt Helen . . .* The third time she wrote a whole page about meeting Steve, but beyond that her fingers refused to work. She could not write the words, "He loves me and wants to marry me." When she got to them, some sort of paralysis set in. She stopped writing, tore up the letter and threw it away.

She tried writing it to herself. The words were meaningless. Looking at them, she felt like an imposter, a writer of fiction—emotionally, she felt nothing at all. She said them aloud. "Steve loves me," she told herself. And hearing the words spoken, there was a little rush of pleasure. But she couldn't hold the feeling; it died almost at birth. She didn't believe it. Of course she didn't believe it. She was still Margaret Hall, wasn't she? She hadn't changed. Steve didn't really love her. Maybe he felt a little sorry for her. Maybe he was lonely. But he didn't love her. He would find it out soon enough.

And there was Kenny. Steve said it didn't

matter about her accident, that he had a son. But sometimes she wondered. Time after time they made plans to spend Sunday entertaining Kenny, only to discover that Evelyn had plans of her own for the boy. Steve said it just proved his point. Until he was married and had a home of his own, he wouldn't see very much of his son. But Margaret wondered if his marriage would be enough. It seemed to her that Evelyn would go to any lengths to keep Kenny and Steve apart. There was something spiteful in the way she managed to thwart nearly every attempt Steve made to see the boy.

And Steve could never mention Evelyn without a little hate creeping into his voice. Sometimes he sounded as though the only thing he wanted on earth was to get the better of her. As though Kenny were not a son he longed to see, but an issue to be won, a helpless little bone of contention. And, hearing him, Margaret would be torn between sympathy for him and a great pity for the child whose parents seemed so determined to tear him apart in one way or another.

Kenny was such a sensitive youngster. He always announced himself when Steve brought him to see her.

"Here I am, Maggie," he would say, his blue eyes shining in anticipation, his little body quivering with eagerness, like a puppy about to be let off the leash. But his eyes would not leave her,

nor would he relax, until he had received assurance that she was just as glad to see him.

"Kenny!" she would cry and hurry to him, to give him a hug and tell him how happy she was.

Only then would he dissolve into a normal little boy—racing around the room, chattering endlessly if not always intelligibly, and with so much energy the apartment couldn't contain him long. It was unnatural for a five-year-old to wait like that for permission to be himself.

But except for that, and the few times Steve had lost patience with him—which had the effect of making him sullen and defiant—they had happy times together.

They walked through the park, with Kenny skipping along between them, darting ahead to chase his ball, or find a stone, or try to catch a tame but wary pigeon. They took him down to the lake to see the swans, she and Steve sitting quietly on the grass while Kenny ran back and forth at the water's edge, making what he considered fearful noises to attract the attention of the dignified birds.

She could laugh now, weeks later, remembering how his fat little legs had betrayed him, how his first wail when he fell to the soft ground had changed to a yell of triumph when one of the nearer swans sailed over toward him to investigate the cause of the commotion.

But there hadn't been many days like that. Evelyn's promises to the contrary, there seemed always to be something to keep Kenny at home with his mother. Sundays were the only days Steve and Margaret were both free, and each one had been carefully planned for the boy's pleasure. But nearly all of them proved to be disappointments.

Their picnic in the country was no exception. Spring had been late in arriving, the days too damp and chilly for much outdoor activity. But for some time they had been promising Kenny they would go the very first Sunday it turned warm. And this was it. Every day for almost a week had been bright and sunny. Jonquils and daffodils and clumps of violets added spring colours to the green lawn in front of Margaret's apartment.

Margaret was up early, preparing sandwiches, frying chicken, making up a fruit salad which Kenny especially liked. She had everything ready and was cleaning up the kitchen when Steve arrived.

"Where's Kenny?" she asked, as Steve followed her back to the small kitchen. "I found those cookies he wanted—remember, the ginger ones? Are we picking him up later?"

Steve was silent, and Margaret, turning to look at him questioningly, felt that she knew the rest of this conversation by heart. They had gone

through it so many times. Steve's scowl confirmed her own dismay.

"Not again!" she said.

"Again. Only this beats them all. This time I was honoured by a call from the dowager herself."

"Mrs. Ransome?"

"None other." Steve's voice was heavy with irony. "The lady says her darling daughter is ailing. She is, in fact, suffering from one of her 'dreadful, dreadful' migraine headaches—the implication, of course, being that I am the cause of it."

"How?"

"How am I the cause? Just by being alive, I guess. I'm sure the dear lady wished me dead many times."

"Oh, Steve!"

He was leaning against the sink, and it seemed to Margaret that his whole body sagged a little. She went to him and he opened his arms, holding her, accepting the comfort she offered.

After a few minutes, she looked up at him anxiously. "Have you had breakfast?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I had this telephone call first thing this morning, and I dressed and came right over."

"Then, come on. Sit here at the table and I'll fix you some eggs. There's plenty of coffee."

Margaret led him to the straight chair beside

the kitchen table. He sat down obediently and watched her pour the coffee. "Do I have to have eggs?" he asked. "Why can't I have some of the chicken?"

"But you can. All of it, if you want."

He grinned up at her, and she promptly felt better.

"Don't think I can manage it all, but I'll try," he said, helping himself to a drumstick. "Sandwich, too?"

"Of course, pig," she said, smiling at him. She put the salad back in the refrigerator.

"Hey, what's that you're hiding from me?" he demanded.

"Fruit salad. Why?"

"Just what I wanted. Have to have fruit for breakfast, you know."

By now she could laugh at him. She brought the salad bowl, putting it on the table where he could help himself. After he had eaten a bit and finished half the coffee, he leaned back and sighed luxuriously.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Much," he said. "Still mad, but less forlorn. Guess I was hungry."

"Of course you were. Feel well enough to tell me the rest of the story?"

"The dowager's story? There isn't any rest. Daughter Evelyn is suffering. It will make her worse if Kenny is taken away today—which

means if he is with me. Otherwise, of course, Evelyn would be better off with him out of the house."

"What reason do you suppose they gave him?"

"That's what's driving me crazy! Evelyn probably told him I didn't want to see him, or something."

"Steve, she wouldn't!"

"Why wouldn't she?"

"About his own father? It would make him so unhappy."

"Sure. And if they do it often enough, he'll hate me. Which would please them right down to the ground!"

"But isn't there something——?"

"I can do? No. That is, until I fight it out with them in court and get a modification—some sort of provision that will force them to let me see him at regular times. And believe me, that's just what I'm going to do."

Margaret didn't like it. Her first flare of indignation in Steve's defence faded when she thought of Kenny. He was the loser, no matter what his parents did now. Children needed so little—and yet so much, really. The plainest of food and any old clothes would do, if they had the big things—love and laughter and someone to run to if they were hurt or frightened. But Kenny had hate flowing over and around and through him, and no matter what the courts said, that

wouldn't change. Not that she could say these things to Steve. Not now. She felt his eyes on her as she rinsed the dishes, dried them, and put them away.

"Anything special you'd like to do today?" he asked finally.

"No. Nothing special. Whatever you'd like," she said.

"I'd like to go and see some friends of mine — Kate and Johnny Starke. I ran into Johnny yesterday at lunch and he said they'd be out at their camp for the week-end. Asked me if we wouldn't come out. I told him we'd have Kenny with us, but we might drop by."

Margaret hesitated. So far, she had managed to avoid meeting Steve's friends. Meeting new people was always such a task for her. And Steve's friends would be especially critical. She wasn't sure she could take it.

"And they—are they friends of your wife, too?" she asked, wiping the drainboard carefully, not looking at him.

Steve rose and moved away from the table. He sounded angry. "Look, Margaret. Let's keep things straight. Evelyn wasn't a real wife, even for the short time we were married. And that was years ago. I have no wife!"

Margaret turned quickly, but before she could speak, he added, "Yes, they do know Evelyn. Practically everybody in Atlanta knows Evelyn.

The Ransomes have too much dough and she has been circulating too long for them to miss. But Kate and Johnny are my friends, my good friends. I haven't seen them in months. Or anybody else, as far as that goes." He dug his hands in his pockets and glowered at her. In his sports shirt and sweater, the pose made him look like an angry schoolboy.

Margaret knew it was because of her he'd seen no one. "Of course we'll go, Steve," she said hastily.

"Oh, forget it, if you'd rather not. We'll do something else."

"No, we'll go. I'm sure I'll like them. It's just that I'm not very good at meeting people, you know."

Steve's face cleared instantly. He looked happier. "Is that all!" he said. "You'll be fine. And you'll like the Starkes, believe me."

"Then let's be on our way," she said, as cheerily as she could. "Should I change?"

"You mean dress up? Oh, no. You look wonderful. They'll be in slacks, probably, if not something worse. You'll see what I mean when you meet them."

Margaret made up her mind not to think about them at all until they got there. And she would do her best to forget little Kenny. After all, a child of five didn't brood over disappointments. He was in a fine home, and surrounded by people

who gave him every attention, even though they had cheated him of his father. By now he was probably playing in the big yard, quite happily. And worrying over him wouldn't help now, in any case.

It was a really beautiful day. Once out of the city, Steve put the top down and they both relaxed, breathing in the pine-scented air, enjoying the warm sun, the bright, clean world and each other. They stopped to pick great sprays of dogwood blossoms and, back in the car, they raced a small brown rabbit who ran beside the road. Margaret insisted he looked most disappointed when they left him behind.

When they turned off the main highway on to the winding red-clay road which led to the Starkes' camp, Steve took the time to tell her a little more about his friends. Kate and Johnny had grown up in Atlanta, and had gone to school together. They had been married about five years now.

"I met them when I first came here from Baltimore," Steve said. "At the same time I met Evelyn. In fact——" He paused and glanced over at her doubtfully. "In fact, Kate was a bridesmaid at our wedding and Johnny was one of the ushers. When they got married about a year later, I was Johnny's best man."

Margaret's laughter was gone. She forgot all her good resolutions. Now she wished with all her heart that she were back in her own apart-

ment with the whole world, including Steve, shut outside. Steve hadn't been fair. He shouldn't have brought her out here to embarrass her before these alien people. Meeting people in her work was hard enough, especially these Atlanta people, these Southerners. There was something clannish about them, snobbish really, the critical way they looked at you. And these people would look her over even more carefully, comparing her to Evelyn, wondering why Steve had brought a big, ugly, tongued-tied girl out to see them. Her hand went up to her scar and stayed there.

Steve was speaking, but she scarcely heard him. She was waiting for him to finish so that she could ask him to take her back. Now

"— and having two babies in five years has kept them at home most of the time. Now that Johnny has taken over his father's business, they have to get out a little more. Johnny's in the publishing business. His grandfather started it, I think. They publish textbooks, mostly "

The car slowed down. Margaret glanced ahead, but she could see nothing to stop for. Again she looked away, keeping the back of her head toward Steve. The car stopped. She could feel Steve's hand grasping hers, pulling it away from her throat, as he had so many times before, turning her around to face him.

"Look at me, Margaret," he said. And, when she obeyed him, "I wouldn't have brought you

out here if there was any reason for you to be upset about meeting these people. I told you they're my friends. Can't you understand that I'm proud of you? That I want to show you off a little?"

"Oh, Steve!" She tried to turn away again, but this time he held both her arms.

"No. Now wait a minute, Maggie. Come on, look at me again. There, that's better. Now, listen. You're a beautiful, gorgeous girl. You're the sort of girl any man would be pleased as Punch to be seen with. You act as though you were deformed or something, because of that silly scar. Nobody would ever notice that, if you'd forget it yourself. And even if they did, it doesn't keep you from being beautiful. Take my word for it.

"As for their knowing Evelyn—that doesn't mean a thing. I doubt if Kate or Johnny have seen her in months. And what if they had! It wouldn't keep them from knowing and liking you. Now!" He eyed her sternly. "Get that pretty chin of yours up and keep it high. Kate and Johnny are going to surprise you."

He had one hand under her chin as he spoke, and he looked at her a long time before he leaned over and kissed her lips. He smiled. "Okay now?"

"Fine," she lied.

But she did feel better. Steve was right—at least, about keeping her chin up. She couldn't go slinking in to meet these friends of his like a whipped puppy, whatever happened.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE road curved sharply to the left and they faced a wide clearing. To Margaret's surprise, there was a lawn of sorts before the small house of wide boarding, painted a dark green so that it appeared to be a part of the woods behind it. Down to the left, on the opposite side from the short driveway, the ground sloped to a mossy bank and a lively little brook.

As they drove in, the front door seemed to burst open and a fat little brown-haired girl came running to meet them, shrieking at the top of her lungs. Almost on her heels was a grown girl, also brown-haired, plump, and beaming a welcome. And no sooner had she cleared the doorway than it was completely filled by a tall, stooped, sandy-haired young man, looking definitely bedraggled in old jeans and a faded plaid shirt, with a piece of limp white flannel draped over one arm and a naked, wriggling baby over the other.

"Steve, you lamb! We didn't believe you'd come!" Kate called as she approached the car.

"Hi!" Johnny yelled, shifting the baby, but not moving out of the doorway. "Come on in."

The little girl was doing her best to climb over the car door and into Margaret's lap. Her round earnest little face was bright red with the effort,

but her fat legs were too short. Margaret reached over with both arms and pulled her in.

"This is Maggie, Kate," Steve said.

Margaret peered around the lively little girl who was standing in her lap. "Hello," she said, laughing in spite of herself.

"Hello," Kate said. She looked at Steve. "Where's Kenny? I thought Johnny said you were bringing him."

"Evelyn's up to her old tricks," Steve said.

"Oh," said Kate understandingly. "Well—" She turned to Margaret. "That animated cartoon of a child you're holding is Pamela. Say hello to the lady, Pam."

By this time Pamela had both hands in Margaret's hair. "Pretty," she said, giving the hair a yank.

"Ow!" cried Margaret

"Hey!" said Steve "Take it easy, Sprout. Here, go to your ma." He grabbed Pamela and, lifting her over the wheel, handed her out to Kate, who promptly put her down.

Johnny and the baby had disappeared into the house.

"Dignity," said Kate cheerfully. "Dignity and Order—the watchwords of the Starke menage. Climb out of the buggy, you two, and let's go in. Pamela, no!"

Pamela had escaped from her mother and was running full tilt down towards the brook.

"Pamela! Stop this minute and come back here. Oh, dear, she'll fall in again. Do get her, Steve." Despite her words, Kate looked undisturbed. She and Margaret watched Steve's pursuit of his small quarry. He caught her just before she reached the brook and swung her high in the air. "Come on, Maggie," Kate said. "By this time Johnny probably has Howdy's diaper tied around his shoulders like a shawl and anything can happen."

Together they walked toward the house, Margaret trying to forget the awkwardness she invariably felt beside small women, and Kate chattering steadily. Kate's hazel eyes were merry, her manner warm and friendly. "I hope you won't mind the chaos we live in," she said. "It's just our usual state—especially on week-ends. Johnny always 'helps' me with the kids when he is home. Of course it's usually Wednesday of next week before we recover, but it's always fun. Johnny's not the practical type."

Steve and Pamela had joined them as they entered the house.

"Johnny! Where are you?" his wife called.

"Out here, in the kitchen." Kate led the way, and they trailed after her. Johnny was opening cans of beer. The foam had run over and down on the enamel top of the table, where the baby, still naked, sat alternately patting the foamy little puddles they formed and licking his fingers. The

diaper was still over Johnny's arm. He was using it as a bar rag.

"Not too early for a little brew, is it?" he asked as they walked in.

"Your son doesn't seem to think so," Kate said.

"Want a Coke," said Pamela.

"Of course, child, of course. Just give your father time," Johnny replied.

"With fizzle?"

"But natch, little bar-fly, with fizzle."

Kate had picked up the baby, who was protesting loudly. "Johnny, he was sitting in beer," she said, turning him over for inspection. "I think," she added doubtfully.

"Beer?" his father repeated. "Sure Good for him. Give him strength."

"Sitting in it won't," Kate said. "Nor drinking it either, at his age. He's eleven months," she added to Margaret. "Now I'll have to bath him again. Want to come with me?"

"Of course," Margaret said. She could see what Steve meant about the Starkes surprising her. The succession of surprises gave her no time to be self-conscious. Obediently she followed Kate to the bathroom, watched her sit the howling baby in the tub and start the water.

"All he needs is a good dunking," Kate said. "I've bathed him once this morning."

By now there was enough warm water in the tub

for Howdy to splash around in, and he quietened down. "He loves it. I think if we'd let him he'd spend his life in the water," Kate said over her shoulder. "But you'd wither away like an old, old man, Punkin. Come on now, dry pants and a shirt, and you'll be all set."

The baby started to yell again as she lifted him out of the water, put him on the covered bathnnette and got a fresh diaper around him. His mother ignored his protests.

"At least *you're* quiet," she said to Margaret. "But then I don't know that you've had a chance to open your mouth yet, with all the Starks around. Are you always like this?"

"I guess so," Margaret admitted.

"Probably the reason you manage the children so well," Kate commented. "Steve told us you specialize in child photography. How did you get started?"

"Why—it just happened. I worked for a photographer in Bronston, Connecticut, where I lived with my uncle and aunt. And he found I could do the children better than adults. I like children."

Kate had the still-protesting baby in a diaper and shirt. She sat him up and brushed the wisps of straight blond hair back from his little red face. "You're a mess, Theophilus," she said.

"What did you call him?" Margaret asked in astonishment.

"Theophilus. That's his name. Isn't it awful? It was Johnny's grandfather's name, and he insisted. His first name's Howard, thank heaven. But when he acts like this, I call him Theophilus, to discipline him. Here, you take him." She thrust the baby at Margaret with the same suddenness that characterised everything she did.

Surprisingly, young Howard Theophilus took one look at Margaret and quietened down. The yells became gurgles and he wriggled happily in her arms.

His mother regarded them round-eyed. "Well!" she said "Well! What did you do to him?"

"Nothing," Margaret said, smiling. The baby was regarding her solemnly, his fat little hands clutching her blouse

"It's magic," Kate said "Nothing less. Here, let's go in and show the men what you can do. Johnny will never believe it."

Kate led the way back to the living-room, where Johnny and Steve were sprawled in solid comfort. Pamela had made a tent of the Sunday paper in the middle of the floor and was happily crawling in and out of it.

"Hey, you two. Look at this!" Kate waved an arm at Margaret and the baby. Both men looked up.

"The modern Madonna, eh," Johnny said. "What'd you do, give him knock-out drops?"

"She didn't do a thing!" Kate answered for her. "He's just fascinated, that's all."

"I know how he feels," Steve said. "She has the same effect on me. Come over here, Maggie." He patted the couch beside him invitingly. "That little guy will be asleep in a minute and you can fascinate me for a while."

Johnny was looking from one to the other quizzically. "What's Linda going to say to all this?" he asked. "I thought she had you about ready for that walk up the aisle."

"Johnny!" Kate said reprovingly.

Johnny looked at his wife and promptly enlarged the field. "And Mary Lee and Elizabeth?" he asked. "What do they think about this read headed threat, Steve?"

"Haven't asked 'em," Steve said, quite undisturbed. He grinned happily at Margaret, who was now beside him. "This one's taking all my time these days. It's going to be a permanent arrangement."

"It's what!" It was a duet. Both the Starkes looked at Steve and then at Margaret. Even the youngest Starke, now almost asleep, stirred in her arms.

"Yep. She's promised!"

A glow of pleasure went over Margaret as she realized that Steve really did look proud of her.

He was beaming at his friends as he made the announcement.

"Why, that's wonderful!" Kate said.

"It sure is. Congratulations, guy!" Johnny said, looking at Margaret again. "And, girl," he added, "you're showing real judgment."

"You see, Maggie? Didn't know how lucky you were, did you?"

"Oh, yes," Margaret told him. "I knew."

"The only trouble is," Steve complained, "I can't get her to set a date. She keeps putting me off."

"Are you out of your mind, girl?" Johnny asked. "Don't you realize how many women are after this big bug? I've been trying for years to figure it out."

"Maybe men aren't as scarce where she comes from," Kate suggested. "Attractive men, that is." This was directed to Steve, and he made a little bow. "She's a Yankee, you know."

"Ummm, could be," Johnny said. "How long have you been down here, Maggie?"

"Two years, about," Margaret said.

"You see," Johnny told the others, "she's still a foreigner, that's the trouble. Hardly able to speak the language yet."

"We don't give her much chance, poor thing. Would you like to talk a while, Maggie?"

"No, thanks," Margaret said, laughing.

"The quiet type," Steve explained.

"Sort of a contrast to Evelyn, isn't she?" Johnny said thoughtfully.

"Well, I should hope so!" Kate said. "Do you know Evelyn, Maggie? Steve's ex?"

Margaret shook her head.

"Another motto of the Starke family—'Nothing sacred,' " Steve commented.

"Well, good heavens, Steve, there was nothing sacred with you two, the way you used to behave! Evelyn is one of my oldest friends, Maggie, and I know what she's like."

"A spoiled brat, if ever there was one," Johnny contributed. "Another beer, Steve?"

"Not now, thanks," Steve said.

"Steve wasn't much better, if the truth were known," Kate said.

"And it is going to be known before I can get Maggie away from here," Steve added.

Margaret looked at him anxiously, but he seemed amused.

"They were both kids," Kate continued, ignoring him. "Not a grain of sense in either of 'em. They fought all the time - everywhere. One of their biggest battles was during a dance at the Driving Club. Atlanta will never forget that one. Not even having Kenny could stop them. And for that matter, Evelyn hasn't changed much, even now.

"She went back to live with her family when she and Steve separated, you know. And they

still treat her as if she were about ten. 'If she doesn't get her own way, she has tantrums. Except for that, she's a nice girl. Isn't she, Johnny?'

"Except for acting like a ten-year-old when she's twenty-five, yes," Johnny said. "Who's this new boy friend of hers? Have you met him, Steve?"

"No," Steve said. "I didn't know she had one. Who is he?"

"That's what I asked you."

"His name is Richards—Dick Richards," Kate answered them both. "And he's nice. I met him at the Farnums' luncheon, Johnny, the one you never got to—remember? He's a big, kind of gruff man, an engineer for some oil company. He's a lot older than we are, but not really old, you know. About thirty-five, maybe."

The baby in Maggie's arms stirred and Kate interrupted herself. "Let's get him into his crib while we're able, Maggie," she said. "I want to get dinner started. You can come visit with me while I work."

It was a big kitchen, with room for a table and four chairs between the two side windows. It was in no sense luxurious, but it was comfortable, and Kate bustled about it happily and efficiently.

"We call this place our camp," she told Margaret, "but the truth is it feels more like home

than the house in town. We spend as much time here as possible. Too much family in town." She wrinkled her nose expressively. "You see, there's all my family and all Johnny's family, too. That's the trouble with settling in your home town. I suppose your people are all up North somewhere." Taking a bowl of green peas out of the refrigerator, she gave it to Margaret with an empty saucepan. "Want to work?" she asked.

"Of course," Margaret said.

"Sit there at the table and you can shell these while I fix the potatoes. Where does your family live, Maggie?"

Margaret hesitated. "I don't have one, really," she said. "Except my uncle and aunt. They live in Connecticut. My parents are dead, and I had no brothers or sisters."

"Oh, that's too bad! Although in a way, families can be a nuisance. Johnny and I have plenty to spare, lord knows. That was one thing about Steve's marriage, too, you know. Too much family. Evelyn's, I mean. His is in Baltimore. But the Ransomes! Have you ever met the Ransomes?"

Margaret shook her head. "No, I haven't."

"Well, I'm fond of them, sort of. I've known them all my life. But they've just about ruined Evelyn. Of course she and Steve were practically infants when they were married. Steve has changed a lot since then, but Evelyn hasn't.

When they broke up, Evelyn took the baby and went home, and she and little Kenny are still getting the full treatment. All they have to do is think of something they want and Papa Ransome breaks his neck to get it for them. And if either of them so much as sneezes, they're put to bed with doctors and nurses and Papa and Mama hovering over them. Of course, after all these years of listening to Evelyn whine about how Steve treated her, they really believe he's some kind of monster."

"What about his son?" Margaret asked.

"Oh, they've fought every inch of the way to keep Steve from seeing Kenny. I thought you knew that. I told Steve once I thought it was a mistake for him to go on trying. Because all he's doing is making it hard for the boy. Kenny's old enough now to get confused by the whole situation. Especially when Evelyn gets scared Steve will take the boy away from her and starts telling Kenny what a horrid, mean man his father is and how awful he was to her."

"She doesn't!"

"Oh, yes, she does. I've heard her. Of course, Kenny doesn't understand it all yet, but he gets enough of it. He's going to be a real problem when he gets a little older, if this keeps up. As it is, the Ransomes can't control him at all."

Kate put the potatoes on and started to make

biscuits. "You don't have to watch your diet or anything, do you?"

"No," Margaret said. "Why?"

"Well, there're these, and I made some ice cream for dessert. The way I make it it's mostly whipping cream. But with a gorgeous figure like yours, it can't hurt. And mine's beyond help, anyway. Are the peas ready?"

Margaret looked down at the shells in front of her. She had forgotten them. "No, I—not quite. I was listening to you, I guess."

"Here, let me help you finish them up." Kate picked up a handful of peas and went to work. "You mustn't worry about the Ransomes and Kenny, Maggie. It won't do any good. Nobody's going to change the Ransomes at this point. Of course Steve wants to go on fighting for Kenny, and you can't really blame him. After all, Kenny is his son." She smiled across the table at Margaret. "I like you," she said. "Why don't you marry Steve right away? That would solve everything."

"How?" asked Margaret.

"You could settle down and raise a big family of your own. Steve is crazy about kids, and he's wonderful with them. That's one of the nicest things about him. If you and he had some of your own, Steve would be happy; he'd stop fighting for Kenny, and Kenny'd have a better chance to grow up into a human being."

Margaret could feel the blood draining out of her. She stared at the table-top, trying frantically to think of something to say. But Kate went right ahead, her eyes on the work in front of her.

"Not that Steve could forget Kenny, of course," she said. "But having other children would make all the difference. And a marriage doesn't amount to much without small fry around to keep the place in an uproar. Although you handle them so well, maybe yours wouldn't—Maggie, do you feel sick? Would you like to lie down or something? What's the trouble?" Kate was looking at her anxiously.

"No. I'm all right. Really." Margaret tried to smile reassuringly at her hostess.

"I'm such a darned chatterbox I've probably talked you into a coma!" Kate said. "You're awfully white. Are you sure you feel all right?"

"Of course. I'm fine." Kate watched her for a moment, nodded and began gathering up the debris on the table.

"Any time I bother you, just stop me and say, 'Kate Starke, mind your own business.' I'll hush then." She laughed. "For a while, anyway. The real trouble is you're starved. And being a perfect hostess, I talk you to death before I feed you! I'll hurry now and get these things on."

But for all her talk, Kate managed to serve them a wonderful meal, and by the time it was

ready, Margaret was able to eat it. It was a gay meal, with Kate and Johnny and Steve happily exchanging insults, talking nonsense, and looking to Margaret for appreciation of their so-called wit. Margaret liked these friends of Steve's more and more. And they seemed to accept her completely, despite her silence.

Before Steve and Margaret left, Kate had invited her to lunch. "It's time you got acquainted with our crowd," she said. "I don't know why Steve has been keeping you in hiding all this time."

"For her own protection, no doubt," Johnny contributed. "Don't let the women get you down, Maggie. There are a lot of them who've had a predatory eye on this man of yours. They may not smother you with love and appreciation, you know."

"Don't you worry about Maggie," Steve said, smiling at her confidently. "She can handle them."

"Well, if she can't, I can," Kate said. "Why don't we make it Tuesday, Maggie? I'm slated for lunch in town with Joyce Morrison and her sister, Wilma. They're good girls, aren't they, Steve?"

"Sure," he said.

"Less cat and more woman than some I could mention," Johnny remarked. "At least, Joyce is. I can't say the same of Wilma."

“ Johnny ! ”

“ True, though, Kate. And you know it,” her husband said.

Kate turned to Maggie. “ There may be some others with us, but you’ll like them, I think.”

“ Will this Linda you mentioned be there ? ” Margaret asked suddenly

“ Steve’s old flame ? She might. That won’t worry you, will it ? She’s awfully nice.”

“ No,” Margaret said. “ No, that won’t worry me. In fact, I’d like to meet her.”

“ Good,” Kate said. “ We’ll ask her then ”

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was already growing dark when they started back. The trees on either side seemed to have moved closer to the narrow road so the branches almost touched overhead. It was a time of peace, the stillness broken only by the low, steady throb of the motor. Margaret put her head against the back of the seat and looked up at the deepening blue of the sky, the faint stars becoming brighter even as she watched them. She wished with all her heart that somehow everything would stop, that this place they were leaving and this moment which was passing even as she thought of it could be held forever.

Steve reached over and pulled her closer to him. She put her head on his shoulder, pushing her face against him as though somehow she would hold him there, too, against whatever came after.

Pulling out of the centre of the road into a little clearing, Steve brought the car to a slow stop and sat holding her, wordlessly.

Together they watched the shadows turn from grey to black and fill the woods around them so that one tree melted into another and the foliage became only a dark mass against the lightness above and below. Mist rising from the ground

carried with it the smell of damp earth, of pine needles and the honeysuckle that grew along the narrow ditches and over the fence beyond them. The chittering and cheeping of birds nesting close by them died down. Somewhere, not far away, there was a faint chorus of frog voices. Except for that, there was no sound anywhere.

Until a sudden loud rustling in the bushes beside the car startled them both. Margaret jumped.

"It seems we are not alone," Steve said.

"What do you suppose it is?"

"A rabbit, probably, wondering what we are."

They peered into the gloom around them, but could see nothing. "A rabbit, I'm sure," Steve repeated. "Anything larger than that we could see." He paused, looking at her thoughtfully.

"I don't think he'd mind if you kissed me."

"We-ell," she began teasingly, "if you——"

But the sentence was never finished. Steve's mouth was on hers. The rabbit, if it was a rabbit, went away.

"I suppose we'd better go," Steve said, letting her go at last.

"I suppose," she agreed reluctantly. This was her moment to hold, to keep, to treasure afterwards. She hated to have it end.

"We should mark the spot so we can come back to it," Steve said, starting the car. "It's so beautiful."

Margaret looked around her and laughed,

somewhat tremulously. A flat stretch of land covered by scrub pine, with a small cleared spot at one side of the road. A barbed-wire fence partly disguised by wild honeysuckle. Ahead of them a narrow, rutted red-clay road.

"A place of great beauty," she agreed, as the car picked up speed.

Turning sideways, she pulled one leg up under her and relaxed, her arm along the back of the seat. She rested her head on her arm and looked at Steve.

"Tired?" he asked, glancing over at her

"No, not really," she said.

His gaze went back to the road ahead. He seemed lost in thoughts of his own. There was a little scowl line between his eyes, and the corners of his mouth went down.

Margaret wondered what was in his mind at the moment, but she didn't ask him. She looked, instead, at the faint shadow along the firm line of his jaw, at the neat way his ears were set so close to his head. He had such a well-shaped head. Somehow she must get a good photograph of him, a really good portrait.

And she thought how silly it was that you could love the way a man's hair grew, or the straight line his eyebrows made, emphasizing the seriousness of his brown eyes. Even in this light, Steve's skin had a pinkish tinge, probably from the wind and sun today.

"Deciding whether or not I need a haircut?" he asked suddenly.

"What? Oh, no!" Margaret was startled. He had been silent so long and she hadn't known he was aware of her scrutiny. "Sunburn lotion, maybe," she added. "You look a little pinkish."

"I do?" He put one hand to his cheek inquiringly. "I guess you're right. Feels warm." He reached over and put his free hand over hers. "Good though, wasn't it?"

"The day? Wonderful! One I'll always remember."

"You needn't bother. There'll be more—hundreds and hundreds of them, better even than this one because we'll be married then. We'll be going home together after a day like this one. Think of it, Maggie, going to our own home instead of two separate, lonely rooms. When we shut the door behind us, we'll be locking out the whole blasted world. And it won't be just on Sundays, either. It will be every night. We won't ever be lonely again."

It sounded like heaven—and just as improbable. Margaret felt she couldn't bear to listen. "Yes," she said abruptly. "Yes, Steve." She felt as though she were shouting above the clamour inside her.

Steve looked at her in quick surprise and then turned his attention to the road once more. They

were on the main highway now and traffic was fairly thick. He drove in silence, not looking at her again.

"I'm sorry, Steve," she said finally. "I didn't mean to sound like that. I'm—I'm just a little edgy tonight, I guess. What you were saying—it sounded too good to be true, that's all."

Still looking puzzled, he smiled at her nevertheless. "It's true enough, sweetheart. You'll see."

"Of course I will." She paused, wondering whether or not she should ask the question that was on her mind, deciding at length she could risk it. "What's Linda Howard like, Steve?"

"Linda?" He sounded genuinely surprised. Then his smile widened and his expression changed to one of relief. "Now don't tell me you're jealous because of the ribbing Johnny gave you!"

"Of course not," she said. "Kate was telling me about your friends. I'm going to meet some of them Tuesday, don't you remember? Maybe I'll meet Linda, then."

"Oh," he said. "Good. Just be sure that everyone you meet knows you're my girl. I'm so proud of you, Maggie. I'd like everyone in the world to know you belong to me."

"A poor, blind fool," she said, shaking her head at him mockingly.

"I see well enough," he defended himself.

"Then tell me about these girls I'm going to meet," she said. "Begin with Linda. She sounded interesting."

"She is. And a damned nice girl. I think you two will like each other."

"With you between us?" she asked, teasing him now.

"Oh, it won't be like that. Linda and I weren't ever serious about each other."

Remembering what Kate had said, Margaret was doubtful, but she kept her doubts to herself.

"How long have you known her?"

"Years," he said. "She was in the same crowd with Evelyn and Kate. You see, Mother came from Atlanta originally and she'd kept in touch with her friends here. So when I came down in forty-five, I had introductions all over town. Funny how different the girls were in that little gang. Evelyn and Kate complete opposites, and Linda another type altogether—though she's more like Kate than Evelyn, which is to her credit. Linda is as pretty as her name, a sweet girl, a good sport, and a lot of fun—what more could I say?"

"What more could anyone want?"

"You," Steve answered her promptly. "Where Linda's pretty, you're beautiful. She's a sweet girl—you're a warm, generous, lovely woman. My woman." Despite the fact that they were in traffic now, he leaned toward her; the car swerved, just missing the sedan next to

them. He grabbed the wheel with both hands. "Come over here," he said, "before I wreck the car trying to reach you!"

She moved over obediently and he put his right arm around her, driving expertly with his left. But the traffic was heavy and Margaret stiffened involuntarily.

"This make you nervous?" he asked.

"A little," she admitted. "I'm a sissy about cars, I guess."

"It's not surprising, after what you went through." Gently he released her and she slid over to the other side. We'll pretend we're an old married couple, and drive as sedately as you like," he said.

"In that case, shall I get into the back seat and help?"

"Don't you dare! You start back-seat driving and I'll beat you!"

With a little laugh, she folded her hands in her lap as demurely as possible and sat quite still until they reached her door. Steve parked the car and looked at her questioningly.

"Why not come up and we'll make some coffee?" she suggested.

"Fine," he said.

While she was in the kitchenette, Steve built a fire in the grate. "I don't know whether we can stand the heat," he called to her, "but it looks good."

She carried in a plate of cookies and the percolator and put them on the coffee-table before the fire. Steve was seated on the floor with his back resting against the couch. Margaret sat down beside him and his arm went around her.

"Even old married couples do this," he assured her, looking at her critically. "Or they would if one of them had gorgeous hair that reflects the firelight and a beautiful boneless body to fold up on the rug--and a pink nose. Nothing like a good toasting in front of the fire to get rid of sunburn, I always say."

She touched the tip of her nose. "Is it really pink? I forgot to look when we came in."

He shook his head at her wonderingly. "One girl in ten thousand can come in from a drive in an open car and resist going straight to a mirror! I'll never understand you."

She was concerned. "Do I look so bad? Should I have?" She started up, but he pulled her back beside him.

"You look marvellous and you shouldn't have. It's just that girls do. But of course you're not 'girls'."

The coffee in the percolator had been bubbling furiously, filling the air with its aroma. Now Margaret reached over to detach it. Getting to her knees in front of the low table, she filled the two cups and handed one to Steve. He sipped it, staring into the fire reflectively. When she had

settled down beside him again, he said, "I'm seeing Lee Hendrix tomorrow."

"Who is he?"

"My lawyer. A good friend, too. Weren't you there when Johnny and I were discussing it? Oh, no, I guess you and Kate were in the kitchen . . . I'm going to talk to Lee about Kenny."

Margaret felt a shiver go over her. "Oh?" she asked.

"It's time I did something about that situation," Steve said. "Today was the end, as far as I'm concerned. That—that bunch of empty-headed snobs has just about taken my son away from me, and for some reason I've let them get away with it—up to now. But now, with you on my side, I'm really going to fight them. I'm pretty sure I know what Lee will say, anyway."

"What?"

"Just as I told you, he'll say that when I have a real home to offer the boy, I can get him for part of each year. That's where your help is so important. Meantime, though, I'm going to see if there isn't some way to force Evelyn to let me see him at least once a week. I'll go there, if necessary, but I'm going to see him. I've been pushed around just a little too much."

"Steve, have you thought about Kenny's side of this?" Margaret asked it rather timidly. She had had the feeling, always, that she had no right to say anything. But she suddenly remembered

the picture in the paper of two deserted babies, and it seemed to her that belligerent parents could be almost as bad as neglectful ones. Kenny needed somebody to defend him.

"What do you mean, exactly? I'm Kenny's father, after all. Why wouldn't I have thought of him? He wants to see me, too."

"Of course he does."

"Well, then! It's going to be very simple, really. For once in her life, Evelyn isn't going to have things the way she wants them!" He chuckled. "Maybe she'll open those baby-blue eyes of hers and learn something."

"And Kenny?"

"What do you mean—'and Kenny'? We'll have Kenny with us." Steve put his coffee-cup on the table and was sitting straight, looking at her curiously. "That's what you want, too, isn't it?"

"You know I'd love to have Kenny all the time," she said. "But, Steve——" She looked at him anxiously and then looked away, moistening her lips, hating to go on with this. "Have you ever thought how bad this may be for him? Have—have you ever considered giving him up entirely?"

"Not seeing him at all, you mean? Ever?"

"Yes," she said.

"Are you out of your mind, Maggie?"

"No. No, I'm not. I'm not even saying

that's 'the best thing. But it might be. For Kenny, I mean."

Steve stared at her in shocked silence. Then, as though repeating words of another language, "It might be best for my son not to have a father. Better no father at all than one like me . . . Is that what you're saying, Margaret?"

"Oh, no, no, no! Of course not, Steve. You know I don't mean it that way."

"Then just how do you mean it?"

"I mean that all this fighting is bad. Every time Evelyn gets mad at you, or scared that you're going to take Kenny away from her, she fights back at you through him. She tells him how cruel you were to her, that you don't love him, that he must always stay with her and not believe the things you say to him."

"How do you know what she tells him?"

"I don't, of course. Not exactly. But Kate told me today she talks against you, and I can imagine. You could, too, if you tried. You've said quite a lot yourself."

"What do you mean? Never in my life have I lied to the boy."

"Not lied to him. Made cracks about Evelyn when he was with us. Said ugly things about his mother. How do you think he feels about that?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Margaret! The kid is five years old, not twenty-five. He doesn't know what we're talking about half the time."

"Don't you believe it. When you mention Evelyn, he listens. I've seen him looking at you. And it will be worse as he gets older. It's wrong, Steve. All wrong, for him."

Steve got to his feet and walked over to stand with his back to the fire, looking down at her. When he spoke again, his voice was calm, controlled. "Why haven't you said this before, Margaret?"

"I—I never felt I had the right. I didn't want to interfere. But now things will get worse and you may hurt Kenny so much he'll never get over it!" She scrambled to her feet and started toward him. "Please don't be angry with me, Steve."

"I'm not angry," he said, looking at her coldly. "Not angry in the least. I'm just wondering what sort of monster you think I am, that's all. You seem to think being with me is the worst thing that could happen to my son."

"Oh, no! That isn't what I meant. You don't want to understand me. I meant all this wrangling over him, all this fighting. That can't possibly be good for him." She paused, her head high now. There was surprise as well as determination in her voice. "Although, in a way, maybe I did mean that. This business of dividing a child, even if you can manage it, is not too good for him when it's a friendly arrangement, it seems to me. And when there is bitterness between his

parents, each prejudicing him against the other—well, it just seems hopeless. Nobody wins, and the greatest loser is the child himself.”

“Queen Solomon,” Steve said. “Or Beatrice Fairfax. Just which do you fancy yourself?”

Defeated, Margaret turned away from him and walked back to drop on to the couch. She gazed down at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap, Steve’s words hitting her like the lashes of a small whip, expertly handled.

“Now that you know all the answers, why don’t you go out and tell the boy’s mother to give him up? You’re so wise, I’m sure she’ll listen to you. You know so much about it! I’m sure if he were your son, you’d say, ‘Run along now, Sonny, to your father. He beat me, sure, but he’s a dear sweet man and didn’t mean a word of it. You’ll be happier with him.’ Like hell you would!”

“Steve, I—— Can’t you see I didn’t mean to——”

“Sure I can see. I can see exactly what you meant. You made it clear enough. I can also see that you don’t know what you’re talking about. What do you know about how I feel? Or Evelyn, either, for that matter. At least she had the kid—he’s hers. But you—all you know about children is something you read in a book somewhere. All very high-minded and wonderful and——”

"You'd better go, Steve."

"I'm going. Don't worry, I'm going right away." He picked up his jacket and started for the door. "There's one other thing. I can see how crazy you are about me, too. You must love me a hell of a lot to want me to be so happy! 'Give up your son, Steve,' she says. Just like that. 'Give up the only son you'll ever have and let those old dodoes do what they like with him.'"

"Steve!"

"Good night!" he said, closing the door behind him with a bang.

It was a long time before Margaret moved from the couch. And longer before sleep came. Sometime in the early hours of the morning she dropped into a light doze, to be awakened by the shrill ring of the telephone. It was Steve.

"Margaret Maggie, darling, I'm sorry. I hurt you terribly, I know, but I didn't mean those things I said, honestly. Can you forgive me?"

He sounded so unhappy, so contrite, Margaret would have liked to put her arms around him and comfort him. "Of course, Steve. Of course I forgive you. I spoke out of turn, I guess. I did know a little, at any rate how you felt. Really. Have you slept at all?"

"Not yet. I think I can now. It's a lot to ask, I know, but—do you still love me?"

Margaret hesitated. But this was no time for a discussion. However he interpreted it, a statement of fact would have to do. "I love you, Steve," she said. "I love you more than you will ever know."

CHAPTER NINE

CROWDED as the restaurant was, with the closely spaced tables all filled and the area near the door jammed with waiting people, Margaret saw the girls as soon as she walked in. They were sitting on a long leather seat which had been built into the corner—five of them, all looking sleek and happy and well-dressed, and all chattering at once, like five brightly plumaged birds on the curved branch of a tree. Kate was at the end nearest the door, her head turned away from Margaret, talking to the girl beside her.

Margaret's first impulse was to turn and run out again. She'd known since Sunday how much she was going to hate this. These were Steve's friends, not hers. They never would be hers. She stood irresolutely, her gloved hand against the side of her throat, her body poised for flight.

But, she reminded herself, one of those girls with Kate was Linda Howard. Kate had told her on the phone that Linda would be with them, and she wanted to meet Linda. It was important to her to know what Linda was like. She forced herself to take a step forward. At that moment, Kate looked around.

"Maggie!" she called. "Over here!"

Now Margaret felt that everybody in the place was staring at her. She moved toward the corner stiffly, her colour rising. On her face was what she hoped would pass for a smile.

"You're late," Kate greeted her, "and we are starving." But there was no reproach in her voice or expression. She looked as cheerful and friendly as she had on Sunday.

"I'm sorry," Margaret said. "My last appointment took longer than I expected." She faced a battery of eyes. Her fitted suit of soft brown wool suddenly became too tight through the shoulders; too loose at the waist, and she had a conviction that her slip showed, but she couldn't look down to see. She was vastly relieved when Kate rose to stand beside her, thus dividing the attention of the others.

"We'll forgive her, won't we?" Kate asked.

The girls nodded smilingly. Physically different in appearance, it seemed to Margaret they were remarkably alike. They all had the same quality of poise and self-assurance, as though veneered, polished, and stamped "first class" by the same hand.

"We have to forgive her because her job is important," Kate continued, "and we, of course, are a bunch of parasites."

"Katie!" It was the thin, brown-haired girl next to Kate—a plain girl with a sallow skin and a petulant expression.

Kate grinned. "Why deny the truth, Wilma?" she asked. "This is Wilma Morrison, Maggie. And Joyce Morrison beside her. They look like twins but aren't, really. One of them's a year older—I always forget which."

"Thank you, Katie," Joyce said.

"Oh, so it's you who is older! Well, now we know. That's Linda Howard next to the Morrisons, and the blonde on the end is Madge Bergstrom. Now, let's eat." She took Margaret's arm and started back toward the entrance.

"Leon is holding a table for us," Linda said, smiling her acknowledgment of Kate's introduction as she rose with the others. "I spoke to him when I came in."

"Good. I'll come unhinged any minute now, if I don't get fed," the blonde girl, Madge, threatened.

"You're making me feel very guilty," Margaret said.

"Well, don't," said Linda, at her side. "Those doe eyes and hollow cheeks of Madge's mean exactly nothing. She eats six or seven meals a day as it is, and never gains an ounce."

"Linda!" Madge protested, behind them.

Linda laughed. "You know it's true. Isn't it, Kate?"

"It certainly is. What with dates for breakfast, brunch, lunch, tea, cocktails, dinner, and supper, I don't know how the girl ever gets time to

powder her nose between. Not that this tired old matron isn't envious."

Linda had taken the lead, and when they reached the low railing that fenced off the dining-room, the head waiter came hurrying to greet them.

"Your table is ready, Miss Howard." He unfastened the plush rope barring their entrance and bowed them in. "Six, you said, I believe?"

"Yes, six is right. Where are we? In the corner?"

"Yes, Miss Howard. Right this way, if you will."

They followed in single file, momentarily silent. Margaret, directly behind Linda, was thinking how right Steve had been. She *was* pretty--very pretty, with her crisp brown curls and regular features. In addition, she was the type Margaret especially admired--small, trim, casually smart. She could have modelled for one of the top magazine illustrators. Why Steve should have bothered with her when he could have had Linda . . . ! But the thought of Steve and Linda together hurt. With an effort, she put it aside.

At the round table the arrangement worked out perfectly for Margaret, with Kate beside her and Linda directly opposite. She wanted to form as clear a picture of Linda as possible in the shortest possible time. Seeing her was quite

different from imagining her. It was not an experience Margaret wanted to repeat.

A waiter handed each of them a menu. Margaret looked at it without interest.

"The salads here are marvellous," Kate recommended. "They have a special sour-cream dressing that's like nothing else in this world."

"Fattening, though," Joyce contributed from across the table.

"She doesn't have to worry about that," Kate said.

"Well, you should," Wilma told her, leaning forward a little to speak across Margaret.

"Oh, stop it! Johnny likes me plump."

"Don't be too sure, Katie." The warning came from Madge Bergstrom. "You know what happens when wives let themselves go."

"If she doesn't, she'll find out," Wilma threatened. "I, for one, have had my eye on Johnny Starke since junior high."

"She has her eye on all the men," her sister commented. "Busiest little eye in town!"

Wilma wasn't disturbed in the least. "Why not?" she asked. "I don't want to miss anything. But Johnny Starke is really special."

"Better watch him, then, Katie," Madge said. "Wilma's dangerous, you know."

"Don't you worry," Kate retorted. "She hasn't a prayer." She turned to Margaret. "These are my best friends, Maggie," she said

drily. "They love me, as you can plainly see. Put those knives away, pals; I'm guarding my back carefully."

Margaret laughed, and at the same time felt a small pang of envy. These girls had grown up together. Even their bickering, if you could call it that, had an easy, comfortable sort of feeling to it, born of long knowledge and acceptance. Linda was the only one who hadn't joined in. She was talking to the waiter.

"Ready to order?" she asked now.

Margaret thought if this was a sort of club, Linda must be the leader of it. There was an air of authority blended with her quiet self confidence. The others evidently recognized it. It was to Linda and not to the waiter they named their selections. Watching her now as she repeated the orders, Margaret marvelled again that Steve should have passed over this perfect girl for her. At the same time, she wondered if Linda had ever used that particular, slightly imperious note with Steve. She couldn't imagine Steve meekly obeying orders, even orders from as pretty a girl as Linda.

My nasty disposition, she told herself. Trying to find fault—just any fault. She smiled guiltily across the table as the waiter walked away and Linda turned her attention back to her companions.

"When did you arrive, Margaret?" Wilma asked.

"Arrive?"

"Yes, here in Atlanta. Did you just get here?"

"Oh, no. I've been here two years."

"Two years! But I thought you were a visitor and we——"

"Don't be silly, Wilma," Kate interrupted. "I told you about Margaret's job and everything."

"She never listens unless it's something about herself," her sister said.

"You mean you're working here in town?" Wilma persisted, ignoring Joyce.

"Yes," Margaret said.

"You have relatives here?"

"No, I—— No, I don't." Margaret had the feeling she was admitting something rather shameful, though she couldn't think why.

"Tell us about your work, Margaret," Joyce suggested. "None of us ever does anything interesting—unless a new man shows up on the horizon."

"In which case they pursue him—individually and collectively," Kate explained.

"Well, you needn't be so self-satisfied, just because you've got Johnny," Joyce said. "You know how scarce men are these days."

"Where is your home, Margaret?" Wilma

asked. "I mean, where does your family live?"

"In Connecticut," Margaret said.

"Oh. I knew some Halls, the Lester Halls from Philadelphia. I just wondered . . ."

"For the love of heaven, Wilma, you sound like a government questionnaire!" Linda said impatiently.

"Yes, shut up, will you," Joyce added, "and give Margaret a chance? I, for one, would really like to hear about her job."

"Well," Margaret began hesitantly, "I don't know what there is to tell. I—take pictures. That's about all there is to it."

"How did you get started?" Joyce asked. "That's the thing I could never figure out—how to get started in anything really interesting. You always have to know so much."

"That would be a handicap for you," her sister said, sisterly.

"I haven't noticed any exciting careers in your life," Joyce retorted. "Go on, Margaret."

"I don't see how the poor girl has a chance to go on, with this crowd," Linda said. "So far, you've let her say one word and you've said three."

"One word's about my limit," Margaret admitted. "Anyway, it isn't very exciting. I went to work for a photographer and learned as I went along. He was a very patient man. And of

course when he found out I liked the children best, he suggested I specialize."

"How do you make them sit still for you?" Kate asked. "Every snapshot we tried of Pamela was a long white blur as she dashed away. Finally we gave up and got a movie camera."

"It is hard sometimes," Margaret admitted. "But even though it's work, the results can be rewarding."

"You saw those wonderful pictures of Kenny that Steve has, didn't you?" Kate asked Linda.

"Yes," Linda said. "They are really very good."

"Margaret took them," Kate said

"Yes, I know "

For the first time, Margaret wondered how much more Linda knew about her. From the casual way Steve had dismissed the subject, it hadn't occurred to her before. But Linda herself cut Margaret's speculations short.

"Steve mentioned at the time how well you handled Kenny," she said.

Wilma had been looking from one to the other. "Are you talking about Steve Andrews?" she asked.

"Who else?" Kate said "How many Steves do we know with a son named Kenny?"

"You mean you know Steve?" Wilma asked Margaret directly, paying no attention to Kate.

"Yes," Margaret said.

"That's how I met Maggie," Kate explained. "Steve brought her out to the camp Sunday."

"This past Sunday? But those pictures were taken months ago," Wilma said. "Weren't they, Linda?"

Margaret was acutely aware of Linda's startled look and the undivided attention of the others.

"So what!" Kate exclaimed.

"Oh, nothing," Wilma said. But her gaze went from Linda back to Margaret with avid interest.

Margaret thought suddenly how unkind all this was. If Linda knew nothing about her, certainly this was not the way to tell her.

"Do any of you know Mrs. George Dart?" she asked. "Mrs. Dart was in this morning with her little girl. That was what caused me to be late—the child was so frightened. It's a funny thing how small children get the idea the camera is something to hurt them."

"Yes, isn't it?" Madge agreed helpfully.

But Wilma was not to be stopped. "If you've known Steve all this time, why haven't we met you?" she wanted to know. "Though, come to think of it, I haven't seen him in weeks. Have the rest of you? I thought maybe he was out of town." Her eyes were on Linda as she talked, and Margaret was rapidly revising her original estimate of this little group. The others weren't saying a word. "He's a sly one, that Steve."

Maybe you're the reason we haven't been seeing him. Or have *you* seen him, Linda."

"No," said Linda quietly. "Not recently."

"Do you know our Steve very well?" Wilma asked Margaret.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Wilma—'our Steve'! What are you trying to make of this?" Kate said impatiently. "Not that it's any of your business, but of course she knows him well. She and Steve are going to be married."

There was sudden and complete silence at the table. The steady babble of voices at the tables around them rose and fell, but Margaret's immediate circle seemed to have been struck dumb. Margaret looked quickly at Linda, but as the colour drained away from Linda's face and her two hands grasped the edge of the table as though to steady herself, Margaret felt like a Peeping Tom. It wasn't decent! She was furious with Kate for having so humiliated the girl, and angry with herself that, mixed with her sympathy for Linda, there was a mounting sense of triumph. She had been on the outside of this charmed circle, looking in. She had been made to feel uncomfortable and just a little ridiculous by Wilma's baiting. Now, with a word, Kate had changed everything.

But it was at Linda's expense. And if her good friends were sorry for her, it didn't show. The others were looking at Margaret with astonish-

ment and something very like respect. It occurred to Margaret they might even be glad to see Linda humiliated. But if so, Linda would give them little satisfaction. It was she who broke the prolonged silence.

"Congratulations," she said, looking directly at Margaret, her voice perfectly steady. "Steve is a wonderful person."

"Well!" began Wilma breathlessly. "Well! This is a real——"

But Margaret had no intention of letting this go on. "Kate is just a little premature in making such an announcement," she said

"But Maggie, Steve said" "Kate began.

"I know. But nothing is really settled yet." She spoke directly to Linda. "I agree with you that Steve is a wonderful person, but as I see it, marriage is not a question to be settled quickly or lightly. Let's just say for the moment that Steve and I are good friends."

She felt hypocritical, but it was the best she could do in the circumstances.

"Okay," said Kate, somewhat ruffled. "Okay, if you say so"

Margaret wondered if she had forfeited Kate's friendship. But Kate should have thought of Linda. She had no right to make such a statement. Margaret was extremely grateful to see the waiter approaching them with their lunch.

It was a funny, formal sort of meal. Even

Wilma was subdued, and the conversation, if you could call it that, was sporadic and unnatural. Mentioning a two-o'clock appointment, Margaret got away from them as quickly as she could. Her good-byes were brief. She could see no friendliness in Kate's eyes, now, but she was pleasantly surprised to find Linda regarding her with evident liking. On her way back to the studio, she tried not to think what they might be saying now that she had gone.

She kept trying to put them out of her mind during her first two appointments. But she couldn't forget Linda's white face—the shock in her blue eyes. Such a pretty face—and a figure to match, too. A girl who looked like that shouldn't have any trouble getting any man she wanted. Including Steve.

CHAPTER TEN

STEVE called her in the middle of the afternoon.

"Maggie! How was the lunch?"

He must have been worrying about her meeting with Linda.

"Nice," she said. "I was a little late and kept them waiting, but they didn't seem to mind."

"Time doesn't mean much to them. They haven't anything else to do," he said. "Who was there with Kate?"

"Joyce and Wilma Morrison, Madge Somebody, and Linda Howard."

"Oh. Quite a gang. Did you like them?"

Margaret hesitated. The others didn't count, really. "I liked Linda," she said. "I liked her very much."

"Good!" Steve sounded relieved—and pleased. "I thought you would. Darn nice girl, isn't she?"

"Yes," Margaret said. "Yes, she is. Everything was fine, Steve."

"I'm glad to hear it. I haven't seen—any of them in quite a while." The hesitation was slight, but Margaret noticed it. He was telling her, quite unnecessarily, that he hadn't been seeing Linda.

"I know," she said. "They mentioned it. Said they'd missed you."

"Well, we'll fix that, now the ice is broken," he said confidently. "I'll see to it that you meet everyone."

"Yes," she agreed. "That will be fun."

"Did you have a good lunch?"

Margaret thought back. Had she eaten? If so, she hadn't the faintest notion what it was. She must have ordered something and eaten it. "I had a big salad," she said hastily. "It was delicious. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wondered. Well, I won't keep you. Imagine you're pretty busy."

"Yes. I am. I have an appointment waiting."

"Oh. Well, I'll let you go, then. See you to-night?"

"I—could we make it tomorrow night, instead, Steve? I'm pretty tired."

"Of course, if you'd rather," he said quickly. "Although I could take you to dinner and then get you home early."

Margaret wanted a little time to think things out before she saw him. She wanted to work out in her own mind just what she would tell him about the luncheon and what she would leave unsaid. And she was tired, very tired.

"Tomorrow night," she said again. And he agreed, reluctantly.

But the day was not yet over for Margaret. Just before the studio closed, Kate walked in.

"I'm going to be late getting home, but I don't care," she announced. "I wanted to get a few things said first. *And* I've got news."

Margaret offered her a chair, carefully closing the door so that no one else would be likely to hear them.

"I guess apologies are in order," Kate began, "but I'm not very good at it."

Margaret started to protest, but Kate interrupted her.

"It's no use Maggie. I shouldn't have said what I did, and I'm sorry. I had no business announcing your engagement for you--and certainly not like that! I could have bitten my tongue out afterwards, but the damage was done. Wilma made me so darned mad!" She began to look mad all over again.

Margaret smiled. "She didn't improve my temper either, if you must know."

"You should have slapped her down," Kate said. "She's been begging for it for years now. I never realized until today what a little snip she really is! And then, of course I'm such an idiot. Instead of telling Wilma off, all I do is make you mad and hurt Linda. Two things I didn't want to do. Diplomat, that's me. They should send me over to see Joe Stalin. I'd have World War Three started the day I arrived!"

"I doubt it," said Margaret. She was relieved to know that Kate was still friendly.

"Think you can forgive me?" Kate asked directly.

"Of course. I appreciated your reason for doing it, even at the time. I was just sorry about Linda, that's all."

"You liked Linda, didn't you?"

"Very much. Who wouldn't?"

"Nobody, I guess. Wouldn't, that is. As a matter of fact, everybody does like Linda. She's one of the most popular girls in Atlanta. Always has been."

"I can see why," Margaret said. "It would be hard not to like her."

"It's really too bad, the way she feels about Steve," Kate continued reflectively. "She's turned down more proposals than most women get in a lifetime—and there she goes, carrying the torch for probably the only guy in town who would drop her for another girl. Not that I blame Steve," she added hastily. "Ah, well, that's life! Is this where you work?" She looked around her curiously.

"Yes, mostly. I use one of the other studios for groups, but this is planned for my special customers."

"It looks more like a playroom than a photographer's studio."

"Just the end of a busy afternoon," Margaret

explained. "We don't keep all these things spread around, but I had a pair of really difficult youngsters in here this afternoon."

Kate was regarding her appreciatively. "You know," she said, "I wouldn't be surprised if you could handle that little jumping jack of mine. Want to try Pamela sometime?"

"Love to," Margaret said promptly.

"Good. I'll talk to Johnny about it and we'll make an appointment." She got up and moved around the large room restlessly. Margaret watched her, wondering what was on her mind and why it should make her so uncomfortable. What ever it was, Kate was having trouble saying it. Finally she turned on her heel and looked at Margaret.

"I'm not sure I should say what I'm about to," she began. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course."

"Even from Steve?"

"Ummm, that depends. Is it something that would affect him?"

"Yes, it is. But it only has to be a secret for a short time, and anyway, there isn't a thing he could do about it if he did know, I promise you that."

"I'd rather not make any such promise, Kate, without knowing what it's about. Steve's interests are too close. Forgive me?"

"Of course, dim wit. I love Steve too—in my

way. But it isn't going to hurt him not to know this for just a little while. And I made a promise I have to think about, too."

Margaret was still hesitant.

"Oh, come on, Maggie! I'll trust you. Here I am standing right here with the answer to your biggest problem on the tip of my tongue and you won't let me tell it!"

Kate looked so frustrated that Margaret was tempted to laugh. "You're sure this isn't anything that will hurt Steve?"

"Sure. Fact is, it's the best thing that could happen—for him and for you, and for—for everybody."

"And he'll know about it soon, in any case?"

"For the love of Pete, yes! Promise?"

"All right. I promise I won't mention it to a soul."

Kate sighed. It was a tremendous sigh, exaggerated but obviously heartfelt. "Thank goodness! Here I had a chance to make up for some of the damage I did this noon and I didn't think you were going to let me. Now, here it is. Evelyn is going to marry Gordon Everett Richards! Isn't that something?"

Margaret stared at her blankly. Kate sat down again and leaned forward, speaking with great earnestness. "Don't you see? It will get the whole problem out of your hair, and you and

Steve can go ahead just as though he'd never been married before."

Margaret didn't see, and showed it. Kate began to sound just a little impatient. "But, Margaret, don't you remember we were talking about Dick Richards Sunday—Evelyn's new boy friend?"

"Yes," Margaret said. "But I don't understand how——"

"Well, I saw Evelyn this afternoon and she told me in the greatest confidence that she is going to marry this guy and go to South America with him. *And* they are taking Kenny with them. So all this squabbling over Kenny will stop, and you and Steve can settle down in peace and raise a family of your own."

Margaret was glad she was sitting down. For the moment, every ounce of strength seemed to have left her. Fortunately Kate went right on talking.

"Just as I told you Sunday, all this fighting over Kenny is bad for him, and with the Ransomes and Evelyn feeling as they do, Steve hadn't a prayer of getting his son except for seeing him every now and then, of course. Evelyn said they've gone into it with their lawyer and she has a right to take Kenny with her. I mean, there isn't a thing Steve can do to stop her. She has custody, you know. She talked more about that than she did about this man she's marrying. I

don't envy him, believe me! But from all I can gather, he's okay and he likes Kenny—and the big thing is to get Evelyn and the kid away from that family of hers."

All Margaret could think was how Steve would feel about this. Steve was losing his son. "And you call this the best thing for Steve?" she asked.

"Don't be such a dope, Maggie! Of course it is. For him and for you and for Evelyn, and most of all for Kenny. If there is anything in the world Kenny needs it is to get away from the Ransomes and have a real home, with a father to spank him if he needs it—and to spank his mother too. She needs it more than he does. From what I hear, this Richards is just the man to do it, too."

"But, Kate—"

"Now, wait a minute. This way, Steve won't see Kenny for a while, that's true. But he lost the kid a long time ago, if he'd only see it. Steve is just too stubborn to give up."

"Will Steve know about this before they are married?"

"Yes, of course. Don't you worry. The Ransomes always do things up right. But Evelyn says Steve won't be able to do a thing to stop her, anyway. Steve didn't even contest the divorce, you know, much less ask for Kenny part-time. So I guess she can take Kenny anywhere she wants to."

"But if there should be something—Steve will know in time?"

"Oh, he'll have time enough. The thing is, nobody is to know yet, and she swore me to secrecy. She didn't say why, but it's just like her. She always wants to do things her own way. But it's definite enough. They're going to announce it any time now. And once they're gone, you and Steve can start a whole new life. Don't you see, Maggie, how it will work out?"

"Yes," Margaret said, truthfully. "Yes, I see exactly how it will work. I'm grateful that you told me Kate." Her voice sounded faint, even to her own ears.

Kate looked at her questioningly. "Are you unhappy because of Steve?"

"Of course," she said. "Of course that's it. I'm just worried about him. But I think you're right - it will be best for him, as well as for Kenny - and Evelyn."

"And for you, too!"

Margaret was amazed to find that she could smile at this new friend of hers. "You're nice to think about me," she said.

"I like you," Kate said. "I told you that." She glanced at the small jewelled watch on her plump wrist. "Good lord, Johnny will have the police out after me! I've got to run."

Margaret walked out with her. The studio was empty.

"Can I drop you somewhere?" Kate asked.
"My car is parked around the corner."

"No, thanks," Margaret said. All she wanted now was to get rid of Kate before the first shock wore off. "I'll have to lock up here, and I'd like to clean up a little before I go." She groped for some other words. "I'm glad you came by," she added.

"It was the least I could do," Kate said.
"Well, see you soon."

"Yes," Margaret echoed, "see you soon."

She walked back into the empty studio, the trite, courteous phrases going round and round in her head. See you soon, thanks for calling, glad you came by—glad you brought the news I've been dreading, so happy to have you cut the thread and let the sword fall!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It had been eight days since Margaret had heard about Evelyn's plan to take Kenny away. Eight days since she'd made up her mind that, for Steve's sake, she must go, too. Eight days of pretending to Steve that everything was all right. Eight days of agony.

As though to put Margaret's decision to the final test, Evelyn had allowed Steve to have his son for the whole of the Sunday just past. Margaret and Steve and Kenny had spent most of the day at the park—with Steve and Kenny as light-hearted as two friendly puppies. Steve taught Kenny to play catch. They carefully inspected all the animals in the Zoo. And when Kenny began to grow tired, his father lifted him high in the air and settled him on his shoulders, holding the short, fat little legs that dangled on either side of his neck and grinning at Margaret, while Kenny shrieked with delight and dug both hands into his father's hair to hold on.

They had had a happy time, Steve and his son, with Margaret watching and smiling and doing her unsuccessful best to forget that this was the last day she would see them together.

Now, on Wednesday, as she sat facing her employer with her resignation in her hand and a re-

quest for help as well, she felt numb. All she had left was her determination to go and the cold, hard fact that she would need another job in order to live.

"But, Margaret, I thought you were quite happy here," Mr Satterlee protested. "Your work is good and you have a real talent with the kids."

"Thank you, Mr. Satterlee. I've enjoyed working here. My reason for leaving Atlanta is personal; it has nothing to do with the studio."

It was the truth. She had liked being here. Mr. Satterlee was a good photographer, and he had taught Margaret a great deal.

He was a stout man, with a red face and a shock of snow-white hair. Life had been kind to him, and his pudgy features rarely expressed anything but kindness for the world around him. Now he looked puzzled. "I take it you don't want to tell me about it," he questioned tentatively.

"I'd rather not."

"All right," he said. "But take it from an old man, Margaret, if it's a love affair that's bothering you, running away from it isn't going to help any."

"In this case, I think it will." Margaret spoke calmly, and marvelled at herself that she could.

"I see. Well, it's your business." He leaned back in the swivel chair, his elbows on the wooden arms, his finger-tips together. Margaret waited

as patiently as she could while he pursed his lips and stared at the top of his desk. Finally he looked up at her.

"I've got it," he announced. "Ever been to Richmond?"

She shook her head.

"Well, it's a nice-enough city. Can't compare with Atlanta, of course. Been here long enough to become an Atlanta booster, Margaret?"

"Yes, sir," she said, "thanks to you. It's a fine place to live."

"Best there is," he agreed. "But if you've just got to leave it, Richmond isn't bad. Not bad at all. I have a friend there, Tom Colebrook, who has his own studio. Tom used to work for me, but his wife came from Richmond and wouldn't give him any peace until he took her back there." He cocked his head at her. "You women!" he said. "Never satisfied."

"It isn't like that, sir, really," Margaret said earnestly.

"I know, I know. I'm kidding, Margaret. Not that Tom's wife wasn't a little—but anyhow . . . Chances are Tom would be glad to get you. Would you like me to write to him?"

"Could you call him, instead, Mr. Satterlee? I'd be glad to pay for it. And it would save a lot of time."

"Anxious, aren't you!"

"I'd like to go as soon as possible," she ad-

mitted. She felt ashamed that she hadn't told him before. She had written her aunt the night she made her decision, but she had put off this very final step as long as possible. Now she felt she couldn't take much more of this dishonesty with Steve. And lately she had been afraid to read the papers for fear of finding the announcement of Evelyn's engagement. She must be completely out of the picture before that happened. "I'm sorry, Mr. Satterlee. I should have given you more notice, but the whole plan is rather sudden."

"Well, don't worry about it," he said. "I've been taking it kind of easy lately. I can take over your appointments— or most of 'em— and we'll get Greg Baldwin in to handle the rest. Do you want to wait while I put through the call to Richmond?"

She rose hastily. "No, I'd rather not," she said. "My next appointment is probably waiting, and— well, I'd rather not, anyway."

"You go to work, then. I'll let you know."

"Thank you," she said. She stopped in the doorway. "I'll never forget how wonderful you've been——" she began. But he had the telephone off the hook and waved to her with his free hand as he said, "Mary. Get me Colebrook's Studio in Richmond, Virginia. I haven't the number."

She closed the door behind her softly, and hur-

ried to the reception-room. This appointment, her last for the morning, was the only type she disliked doing. It was a mother and baby, and would no doubt be seen later in the Sunday paper. Having met Mrs. Jones, she knew perfectly well there would be no use trying for anything original. She knew before she had taken them which pose Mrs. Jones would select. It would be a Madonna-Jones-and-child. Yesterday it had been a Madonna-Smith-and-child, and the day before a Madonna-Crittenden-and-child.

Mrs. Jones would assume what she fondly believed to be all the real expression and would only succeed in looking smug. Margaret had her moments when she hated these self-satisfied women with their squirming, squalling little masterpieces. This was one of them.

It wasn't the babies. Left alone with him, Margaret could have had a wonderful time with the baby. But the mothers, this type of mother, were another story. So Mrs. Jones had succeeded in producing a baby. So what. Millions of women had millions of babies.

Oh, of course she knew the answer to that too. No other woman had produced this particular little bald, blue-eyed scrap of humanity who was eyeing her placidly from his mother's arms. There was only one George Jones, Junior, aged eight months and three weeks, son of George Jones, Senior, and Molly Mason Jones.

Posing Mrs. Jones carefully, Margaret tried to avoid looking at her. But that was impossible, of course. It was impossible not to hear her too. She hadn't stopped talking since she walked in. The baby had gained three pounds. The baby had a new tooth. The baby looked exactly like her husband's Uncle Edmond. They were going to give Uncle Edmond one of the pictures. Did Miss Hall think she had on too much rouge for the picture? Somebody said she should grease her face for the picture—it brought out the highlights or something. But of course it wasn't important how she looked; it was the baby who counted. She'd hardly given a thought to herself since the baby came.

"The pacifier, Mrs. Jones," Margaret said patiently. "Take the pacifier out of the baby's mouth."

The baby had been contentedly sucking away on the bit of rubber and objected with a loud and continued howl to its removal.

It was at that moment that Mr. Satterlee opened the door and peered around it. "It's okay, Margaret," he said. "Tom was delighted with the idea. Tell you about it later."

To Margaret's intense relief, the diversion of his appearance was enough to quieten both Mrs. Jones and her child temporarily, and she got the shot she wanted. As the proofs later showed, it was the only one that caught both mother and

son with their mouths closed. But Margaret no longer cared.

That night she told Steve she was going home on a visit. She picked her moment with great care. They had been to an early show, and Steve was saying good night when she told him. All evening, as they sat in the darkened theatre, she had been rehearsing it. It was the first time she had lied to him, and she was terrified that she would give herself away. Somehow she hadn't. Perhaps because Steve had been too surprised.

She showed him Aunt Helen's letter.

We can't wait to see you, my dear. It has been much too long, and your Uncle Arthur and I have missed you. When do you think you can get away? And be sure and tell us how long you can stay with us.

Steve didn't like it. "I'd sort of counted on you to stick around," he admitted. "It would be a big help to me to have you. I had another talk with Lee, and of course his whole case is going to be based on our being married and having a home to offer Kenny. He says if we just ask for Kenny's vacations and some of the holidays during the year, we'll probably get it all right. He's working on it now."

Margaret's sense of guilt became almost unbearable. She should tell him what Evelyn was

planning, in spite of everything. It was heartless of her not to.

"I'm so tired, Steve," she said, going to him. This, at least, was entirely true. The strain of the last few days had left her exhausted.

His instantaneous response was to draw her close, and she was grateful that she could hide her face against him.

"Of course you are," he said. "You've been working too hard. I suppose this trip is just what you need, and I'm a selfish hound to object to it. I was just thinking of me and how much I'd miss you. But if it's only for two weeks I guess I can survive."

For answer, her arms tightened around him. She didn't trust her voice. She burrowed her head into the hollow between his shoulder and neck—for just that little space relaxing her defences, taking strength from the hard muscles of the arms that held her, borrowing for just a little minute the warmth and security his nearness offered her. Wishing frantically, desperately, for the miracle that couldn't happen, that she could stay here like this forever. But only a little of this was communicated to Steve.

He took her by the shoulders and held her off so that he could look at her. "You won't stay longer than two weeks, will you?" he demanded with mock severity. "You aren't planning to run out on me?"

She forced herself to look at him. "I love you, Steve," she said.

Satisfied, he pulled her close to him again and kissed her. And that moment of danger passed.

When he'd gone, she began to pack. This was Wednesday. She had told him she planned to take the midnight train on Friday so that she might get in the full day's work and complete as much as possible at the studio. It was what she had told Mr. Satterlee, apologizing at the same time for leaving him with her Saturday appointments. But she admitted to herself she was afraid to stay until Saturday, because on Saturday the Sunday papers were on the stands. Weddings and engagements were most frequently announced in the Sunday editions.

It was in the middle of the morning on Friday that Kate called her.

"Maggie, are you alone? Can you talk?" she began, her voice strained and high with excitement. Margaret had taken the call in M. Satterlee's empty office.

"Yes," she said. "Why?"

"Have you seen the morning papers?"

"No." And again, "Why?"

"Evelyn and Dick Richards are married and they're leaving for South America right away. The announcement is in the paper, pictures and everything."

"*Are* married?" Margaret repeated. "Going to be married, you mean."

"No, that's just what I don't mean! I mean, they are married already. They just did it without a wedding or anything."

Margaret sat down abruptly, the telephone still in her hand. "When?" she asked. As if it mattered.

"Last Sunday. I just talked to Evelyn on the phone. She said they kept it quiet because of Steve. They didn't want him to know until it was over and too late for him to do anything. They're all set to go now."

"But, Kate, you told me Steve would know in plenty of time before the wedding, that the Ransomes——"

"I know I did. I didn't lie to you, Maggie, honestly. That is just what Evelyn told me. I should have known better than to believe her, the little sneak! I suppose she'd heard we were friendly with Steve and the truth is she didn't trust me. Oh, and here's the topper—it seems this Richards wants to adopt Kenny legally. Can he do that, you suppose, if Steve protests it?"

"I don't know," Margaret said slowly. "I don't know anything about it." She was thinking that Steve might have seen the paper too. If not, surely somebody would have called and told him. "Kate," she said, "I—I want to try to get in touch with Steve. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. He'll be needing something, that's for sure, the poor guy. Not that I don't believe it's the best thing, just as I said. But, this way, it won't be easy on Steve—not at first. So I'll hush up now and let you talk to him. If we can do anything, let me know. Though I can't imagine what it would be!"

Neither could Margaret. She hadn't any idea what she could do either, but she had to reach him. She had to try to do something.

She asked Mary for an outside line and called the laboratory. Steve didn't answer his phone, but the girl asked her to wait. She would look for him, she said.

Last Sunday, Margaret thought, holding the phone. They were married on Sunday, the day she and Steve and Kenny spent in the park. She and Steve had been acting as baby-sitters for Evelyn while she was making sure Steve would never have his son again.

She could have warned Steve. She had known what Evelyn was planning, even if she hadn't suspected she would do it just this way. Incredible as it sounded, she had been helping Evelyn hurt Steve. For his own good, she added bitterly. Who was she to decide what was best for him? What right had she . . .

But now she remembered what Kenny had said on the way home from the park. At the time she had been so worried about Steve's reaction she

hadn't realized what the child was telling them. And Steve had completely misunderstood him. Kenny was breaking the news, if they had only known it.

They were taking him home. Kenny, contented and a little sleepy, sat between them. He had been remembering in a drowsy little monotone all the wonders he had seen that day. Margaret hadn't been listening closely, and she supposed Steve was paying little attention. Until Kenny said quite clearly, "I have two daddies now, a good one and a bad one. But I like the bad one best." As he spoke, he threw himself on his father.

It had been so unexpected that Steve lost his hold on the steering wheel and the car headed for the kerb.

"Careful there!" he said sharply.

Margaret had reached for Kenny and Steve managed to get the car straightened out before they hit.

She remembered now how lightly they had dismissed Kenny's remark, with Steve concluding that the boy meant his grandfather, who was "good", and Margaret afraid to ask.

"Hello, Miss Hall."

Margaret was startled to realize she still had the phone in her hand. "Yes," she said. "I'm here."

"Miss Hall, I'm sorry. We can't locate Mr

Andrews. He must have stepped out of the building. Shall I have him call you?"

"If you will," Margaret said. "Thank you."

She sat for a moment after hanging up the phone, wondering if there was any chance he had gone home. But she couldn't think why he would. No, he'd gone out for coffee, or on some errand. But she had to talk to him. She had to see him. It would be better if she saw him.

She walked out to the reception-room, stopping on the way to get her pocket-book. A taxi would get her there in a few minutes and she could wait until he returned. Mary was on another phone as she went through the room.

"I'll be back shortly," she said over her shoulder, not waiting for Mary's nod before she walked out to the street.

CHAPTER TWELVE

STEVE finished a last check on the job he'd been doing, scribbled his notes on the big yellow pad. He stretched, leaning back to erase the feeling of slight strain from so much bending, and yawned. It was ten-thirty. Time to stop for a cup of coffee.

In the little drugstore across from the laboratory he ordered his coffee and picked up a morning paper somebody had left on the counter. He had read the headline news with breakfast and now he turned the pages idly—local and political news, amusements, a big furniture ad that caught his eye. He looked it over, wondering which of the periods Margaret preferred. Personally, he liked the more modern stuff, all angles and clean lines. Maybe because his home had been so filled with antiques, he thought. He tried to imagine his very dignified mother folding herself sufficiently to fit the low-strung chair in the picture before him.

The girl brought his coffee and he turned the page of the paper. "Society" came next. Evelyn's picture, a large and flattering one, was in the centre. Below it was the line, EVELYN RANSOME ANDREWS WEDS.

The surprise wedding of the season was that of Evelyn Ransome Andrews, daughter of Mr. and Mrs.——

Unbelieving, he read the entire account. This Richards must be the man Kate and Johnny had mentioned. The paper called it "romantic", an "elopement" which had taken place last Sunday. There were the usual paragraphs of genealogy—"the daughter of—and granddaughter of——" Tribute was paid to Evelyn's popularity among the younger Atlantans, and a few lines given to the groom. But the real blow was contained in the last short paragraph.

Mr. and Mrs. Richards, with Mrs. Richards' son, Kenneth, leave shortly for São Paulo, Brazil, where Mr. Richards will represent——

Steve's sudden exclamation brought the counter girl over. "Anything wrong? Don't you want the coffee?"

"What? Oh. No, thanks." He put a dime on the counter and, with the paper still in his hand, walked out of the store.

"—with Mrs. Richards' son, Kenneth—with Mrs. Richards' son, Kenneth—with Mrs. Richards' son, Kenneth . . ." The words kept repeating themselves over and over as he crossed the street and went back to his own small office. With

Stephen Andrews' son, Kenneth, it should have said. With Stephen Andrew's son, Kenneth, leave shortly for—wherever it was, Brazil. She'd pulled a fast one, all right. But she wasn't going to get away with it. There was some way to stop her. There had to be some way.

He reached for the phone to call her, but he was so angry he couldn't think. He couldn't even remember the number. He sat back to try to get a hold of himself. She couldn't leave the country like that with his son. Custody or no custody, a father must have some rights!

He thought of Margaret. This would be a shock to her, too. She loved Kenny, almost as much as he did. He knew she hadn't heard about it yet, or she'd have called him. He reached for the phone once more, this time calling the studio. Margaret would want to cancel this trip of hers when she heard. Or she could postpone it. She wouldn't want to leave him now.

Mary answered the call. "Give me Miss Hall, please, Mary," Steve said. "If she's busy, tell her it's urgent. I won't keep her long."

"She's not here, Mr. Andrews," Mary said, sounding a little bewildered.

"Not there? Where did she go?"

"I—— She didn't say. Just that she'd be back."

Steve felt unreasonable dismay. He'd been so sure she would be there. "Oh," he said, feeling

thoroughly inadequate. "Well, when she comes back, ask her to call me, please."

"Okay, Mr. Andrews. I'll do that." Mary, at least, was cheerful.

He hung up. And then, without further thought, he called Evelyn.

"I suppose congratulations are in order," he began. "Rather sudden, wasn't it?"

"Thank you, Steve," Evelyn said, accepting the one word and blithely ignoring the rest.

"I said it was rather sudden, wasn't it?"

"No, not really. Dick and I have been friends for such a long time now. A big wedding wouldn't have been quite the thing this time—do you think?" There was no suggestion, now, of illness. Even the whine was gone. Her voice was lilting. And it seemed to Steve—triumphant.

"Tell him he has my sympathy," he said savagely.

"Oh, now, Steve, I could hardly do that! He might suspect you were—well, just the least bit jealous."

"Jealous!" It was an explosion.

Evelyn laughed. "He thinks you're slightly feeble-minded ever to have let me go," she explained. "It's too bad, really, that you don't know each other. You'd like him, I'm sure. Everybody does. Kenny dotes on him. He is the happiest child you ever saw with his 'new daddy'."

Steve would certainly have been guilty of violence had Evelyn been within reach. As it was, he gripped the phone with both hands as he tried to get himself under control once more.

"Still there, Stevie?" Evelyn inquired sweetly.

"Is it true you're planning to take Kenny to South America, Evelyn?"

"Why, yes. Naturally," she said.

"For how long?"

"Oh, I don't know. We're not sure, really. Dick's contract is for two years—it all depends. It's all been so exciting— with passports and packing and things. Dick says we'll just love it there. Who knows? Maybe we'll never want to come back. Oh, but, Steve, now that I think of it, I'm glad you called. Dad's lawyer is going to get in touch with you sometime soon. Dick would like to adopt Kenny—legally, that is. They really adore each other, you know. And it seems the best possible solution. Of course I know it would be——"

Steve slammed the phone down. His mind seethed with a disconnected jumble of profanity, and very little else. What Evelyn was doing was kidnapping his son. Or the next thing to it. Nobody could do that to him. Nobody! He could do a little kidnapping on his own, if it came to that. He and Margaret would take Kenny somewhere Evelyn would never find him. They would go to Europe, if necessary. Europe, Asia,

somewhere—it didn't matter. He had his grandmother's money, which he'd never touched. And when that gave out, he could start taking the money his mother was always offering him. The main thing was . . .

But sanity began to return. There was the point that Evelyn had been given legal custody. He didn't know what his rights were, or even if he had any rights, as things stood now. Maybe he could refuse to let her take the boy out of the country. Divorce or no divorce, he was still Kenny's father. The thing to do was to talk to Lee at once

He didn't wait to call. As the thought formed itself in his mind, he was out of his chair and striding out to the street again. He got his car from the parking lot and plunged into the fast-moving traffic, barely missing a pedestrian in the process.

Twenty minutes later he was seated in Lee Hendrix's office, looking across the desk at him dejectedly. Lee had had more news for him. And it hadn't taken the lawyer long to tell him what he could expect.

"I'm sorry, Steve. You're getting a rough deal, no two ways about it. Given twenty-four hours or even less, I might have slapped a restraining order on them that would hold Evelyn here with the boy until we could go for a modification. But they're already on their way. Old man Ransome called me from the airport. Told me they

were leaving on the noon plane, wanted you notified—after they'd gone. I tried to reach you, but I guess you were on your way here. Not that we had time to do anything. They take off in a few minutes now."

Kenny was already at the airport. Steve wouldn't even have a chance to say good-bye. He could imagine how he looked about now, probably in a gay, striped T shirt, shorts, and that silly little cap on the back of his head. His eyes would be big and shining with excitement over all the planes and the ride he was going to take. Probably talking a mile a minute.

Defeat settled on Steve. It showed in the slump of his shoulders, the downward curve of his mouth, the deeper tone of his voice. When he spoke, it was more to himself than to Lee. "She must have been ready to leave when I talked to her. No wonder she sounded so pleased with herself, the little——"

"Who?"

"Evelyn. I talked to her just before I came here."

"And she didn't say they were leaving today?"

"No. I had no idea they were going so soon. She didn't say a thing about it. And now that I think of it, the paper didn't either."

"She's pulled a fast one, all right," Lee said, an unwilling admiration in his tone. "Phil New-

ton probably dreamed this up for them, to keep us from doing anything about it."

"Newton?"

"Ransome's lawyer. He's as smart as they come."

Steve was silent, staring at the floor. Then he rose, heavily. "Maybe I'd better hire him for my next case," he said.

Lee rose to follow him, unperturbed by the criticism. "Simmer down a little, son," he said, giving Steve a pat on the shoulder as they reached the door. "They won't be gone forever, you know. Just a couple of years. We'll be ready for them when they get back."

Steve nodded without conviction. "By that time Kenny will have forgotten me," he said. "You never had any children, did you Lee?"

"Meaning I don't know what I'm talking about? Well, you're right. But don't lose your perspective. It could be a lot worse. The thing for you to do is marry this redhead you've been raving about and get busy with a new flock. There's no law says you can't have two sons, is there?"

In Steve's eyes, Margaret suddenly stood between them. A desperately unhappy Margaret saying, "I'm a cripple, Steve, inside. I can never have a baby. I can never marry you, Steve. I'm a cripple. I don't deserve anything else. I killed my parents. I can never marry anyone."

He must get to Margaret, assure her that losing Kenny would make no difference, tell her how much he needed her. He had forgotten Lee.

"Hey, take it easy, Steve!" Lee was saying, with some anxiety. "You don't look right to me. Think you'd better sit down for a minute?"

"What in hell do you think I'm going to do—faint?" Steve asked roughly. "I'm okay. I've got things to do. See you and—thanks."

"Thanks for nothing," Lee said wryly, through the opened door.

But Steve didn't hear him. Intent as he was on seeing Margaret as quickly as possible, he had to stop and think where he'd left the car. He tried two wrong places before he found it, his frustration mounting steadily. But once under way, it was a matter of five minutes to reach Satterlee's.

The receptionist looked up anxiously as he walked in. "Have you seen Miss Hall?" she asked.

"You mean she hasn't been back since I called?" Steve asked.

"No, she hasn't. I can't think where she might have gone! And there were people here waiting for her. Mr. Satterlee took them."

Steve stood looking at her uncertainly. He couldn't make up his mind what to do. "Have you tried her apartments?" he asked.

"Yes. There's no answer there. Of course

she had a lot of things to do today. There are always a lot of little things to do when you're getting ready to leave."

Steve hardly heard her. He sank down on one of the couches.

"Are you going to wait for her?" Mary asked.

"I—— Yes, I guess so." If he had any idea at all where to look for her—but he hadn't. And he couldn't think of going back to the lab without seeing her. He couldn't have worked if he'd gone, and he knew it.

With the exception of Mary, who had gone back to work, he was alone in the reception-room. He picked up one of the magazines and glanced through it idly, not really seeing it. He lighted a cigarette, put it in the big glass ash-tray beside him. A few minutes later he forgot it and lighted another. He was crushing the first one out when he heard Mary answer the phone.

"Miss Hall? No, I'm sorry she isn't here just now. May I take a message for her? Oh, yes, Mrs. Starke. We expect her back any minute. I'll have her——"

"Just a moment, Mrs. Starke, please." Mary nodded at Steve.

"Tell her I want to speak to her," Steve said.

"Hello, Mrs. Starke. Mr. Andrews is here. He'd like to speak to you." To Steve, she said, "You can take it in Mr. Satterlee's office; he's in the studio now."

Steve walked rapidly across the room and into the office, closing the door behind him. He picked up the phone.

"Hello, Kate? Steve."

"Hi, feller. Rough going today, isn't it! I'm awfully sorry about Kenny, Steve."

"You know all about it?"

"I just heard they'd gone. I never thought she'd do it that way, Steve, not even Evclyn."

"What do you mean—'that way'? Did you know she was planning this?"

"Not this, Steve, honestly. I had no idea anybody could be so low as to——"

"Just what did you know, exactly?" Steve demanded

"Oh, nothing, Steve, really. Just what everybody knew— that she was going to marry Dick, and naturally she'd want Kenny with her. You know "

"I don't know. And if 'everybody knew', they carefully forgot to mention it to me. My lord, Kate, this is beginning to sound like a conspiracy. I thought I had some friends in this town. At least I thought I could count on you and Johnny. Why in hell didn't you tell me what she was up to?"

"But I'm telling you, Steve, nobody knew she'd do it this way. We thought she'd announce it, and have a proper wedding and everything . . . Anyway, she swore me to secrecy."

"She swore you to secrecy, so you told everybody in Atlanta but me, and as far as I can see, everybody else tried to keep me from finding out too. Do you realize that if I'd had even half a day more, I could have stopped her? Do you realize that you've been a party to a kidnapping?"

"Steve, listen to me a minute——"

"Why listen to you now? It's too late now! It seems to me I've lost more than a son today. I've lost my friends too. Or, rather, I've just found out I never had them!"

"Steve it isn't like that! You've got to listen to me. We didn't know she was going to do this. Nobody suspected she'd pull this sort of thing—she had us all fooled. It's like I told Maggie——"

"Maggie! What does she know about this? Don't tell me she knew it too?" There was real horror in his voice.

"No, of course not, Steve. I don't know what I meant by saying Maggie! How could she know anything about it! I meant Madge, of course—Madge Bergstrom. You remember she was always such a good friend of Evelyn?" Kate spoke rapidly, but she was flustered. The words sounded completely false. Incredible as it seemed, Steve knew positively that Margaret had known of Evelyn's plans and had kept it from him. "I was telling Madge, I thought that Evelyn——"

"Stop lying, Kate!" Steve said roughly. "Since you were confiding in everybody else you talked to, you told Maggie of course." But he couldn't go on, and Kate's silence confirmed her guilt. "Good-bye!" Steve said, cutting their connection.

He put the phone back on the desk carefully, as though it were of the utmost importance that it be set exactly so, at the precise angle in which he had found it.

Still moving very slowly, he drew his hand back from the instrument, put his elbows on the edge of the desk and rested the weight of his head on his hands. He sat quite still, staring at the mahogany desk top directly before his eyes. Margaret had been a party to this thing. Margaret, of all people on earth, had sided against him. It was hard for him to take it in.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MARGARET'S first move when she arrived at the laboratory to find Steve gone was to call his rooming house. The landlady said he had left at the usual time and had not returned. Margaret was not surprised. She was certain by now that he had seen the morning papers and learned about Evelyn's marriage. He might even have gone to his lawyer's office, in which case he should be back soon. She would wait.

She walked around the little office, getting slightly more frantic with each minute that ticked by. She wanted desperately to see Steve, to talk to him, to comfort him if possible. Better than anyone else, she knew how much Steve loved his son.

It occurred to her that she might call the lawyer, see if Steve was there, tell him she was waiting for him. But after looking up the number and suffering the delays of several busy signals, she got the office only to be told Steve had been there and left.

He had gone out to talk to Evelyn, she thought. Of course that was it. That would be the logical thing for him to do. She thought of calling there, and decided against it. But after what seemed another short lifetime of waiting, she threw aside her caution and looked up the Ransomes' number. There was no answer.

As a last resort, she tried to reach Kate. It was just possible she might know something or be able to advise her, or suggest places Steve might be. But Kate's line was busy, consistently and interminably busy, and finally Margaret gave up. She started back for the studio. Surely Steve would get in touch with her there, sooner or later. She would just have to be patient and stay there until he did.

But when she walked into the reception-room, Mary told her Steve was in Mr. Satterlee's office. Her relief was intense. How idiotic of her to go trailing around after Steve, when he was here waiting for her!

Eagerly she opened the door to the office. Steve was sitting by the desk, with his head on his arms. She closed the door and started across to him, but as she did so he raised his head. One look was enough to halt her where she was. But the words on her lips came tumbling out anyhow.

"Steve! I've been looking for you. I waited and waited at the laboratory but nobody seemed to know where you'd gone, or when you'd be back—and so finally—I—gave—up and——"

She ran down. There was no light of welcome in Steve's eyes. Nor anything she'd even seen there before. He looked like a stranger—a stranger who loathed her on sight. He said nothing.

"What's the matter, Steve?" she asked, feeling suddenly a little ill.

Steve looked up. He looked her over very carefully before he answered. "Rather an unnecessary question, isn't it, coming from you?" he said.

"What do you mean by that?" Still, she hadn't moved, but Steve came toward her.

"I mean that you know perfectly well what the matter is. I mean that you knew about this trick of Evelyn's long ago and didn't see fit to tell me. Why you didn't, I'll never know. Why you should want to do this to me is beyond me. I can't figure it out. But it seems I'm just a fool anyway so maybe I'm not supposed to understand these things."

He had reached her and stood looking down at her coldly.

"But, Steve——"

"I don't want to talk about it. Today I have lost my son. I have discovered the friends I trusted aren't my friends at all. And I have found that the girl I—the girl I loved didn't even exist, except in my imagination. That's about enough for one day, don't you think?" He started for the door she had just entered.

Margaret caught her breath. For a moment she felt that speech was impossible. But by the time his hand was on the door, she said, "Steve, wait!"

He turned and looked at her again, that strange, disliking look she had never seen before.

Seeing it, it took all her courage to continue. "I haven't changed, Steve," she said as steadily as she could. "I'm the same girl. I feel just as I always did about you. I don't know what you mean by the rest of that."

His hand was still on the door-knob. "You're telling me you didn't know that Kate and Johnny were working against me, when you were in on the whole thing? You're telling me you didn't know I had lost my son? Don't bother to lie. Kate has admitted it to me."

"That's twice you've said it, Steve—that you have lost your son. Evelyn's getting married needn't mean that, if you want to go on fighting for him, need it?"

He looked at her blankly. "What are you trying to sell me now? That you didn't know they'd gone? That they had taken him?"

"Gone? Gone where?" Margaret felt bewildered.

"Presumably on the noon flight to Miami. But what difference does it make where they've gone? The point is they'll be out of the country in a few hours and they've taken my son with them. The point is that you let them do it."

"I let them . . . But they can't have gone!" Margaret exclaimed. "The paper said they were leaving soon. They can't have gone already!" Her amazement was too genuine for Steve to doubt.

"Okay. So you didn't know they'd gone. They didn't confide in you to that extent, I take it. But you did know they were going. Don't try to deny that."

"Steve, listen to me. Kate told me they were getting married. But she also told me——"

"Then, why didn't you tell me?" He faced her squarely. "Why?"

Margaret's eyes met his. She started to speak, hesitated, dropped her gaze to the floor and then slowly looked up again. He was waiting. "Steve, I——" she began, and then stopped. With a little gesture of helplessness, she turned away. "Oh, what's the use? I can't make you understand now," she said despairingly.

"Try," he insisted. "It's done now. Nobody can undo it. But I might feel a little better if I just knew why. What did you have to gain?"

"Gain?" she repeated. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Then why? Do you hate me so much?"

"Hate you? I love you, Steve!"

He didn't change his expression. "You haven't answered my question," he said.

She tried twice before the words would come. "I didn't tell you, Steve, because I had promised Kate not to. Kate said you would have plenty of time after the wedding plans were announced. I thought I would be gone by then and it would be entirely up to you. I hoped that when the time

came, if you thought well of Mr. Richards, you would decide it best for Kenny to let him go, rather than fight for him and go on tearing him apart as you have been doing. I hoped you would think of him, and not of yourself or of me. I never dreamed they would do anything like this. How do you know they've left? Did someone call you?"

"I talked to Evelyn and then to Lee Hendrix. If I'd known just a few hours earlier, I could have stopped them— at least, until a proper decision was made. You robbed me of that."

Margaret looked at him quickly and then away again. He looked so miserable she felt she couldn't bear it. "I'm sorry, Steve," she said.

He sounded immensely tired now. "So am I," he said. "So am I."

Without another word, he opened the door, walked through it and closed it gently behind him. And Margaret no longer had the strength to follow him.

When Mr. Satterlee returned to his office thirty minutes later, he found her sitting there. One look at her and he ordered her to go home.

"You don't look in any condition to travel, Margaret," he said. "Take my advice, wait over a day or so and get a little rest. Tom was glad to have you, but he can get along without you for another few days. Want me to wire him?"

"Will you, Mr. Satterlee? I'd appreciate it.

I'm going home first, and I'll let him know the date I'll be there. And I'm sorry about today. Something happened . . ." Her voice trailed off into silence.

Mr. Satterlee waited, looking at her anxiously. Deciding she didn't intend to continue, he said, "So I gathered. Are you well enough to go home alone?"

"Oh, of course," she said gratefully. "I'll be all right. I'll just get my things from the studio—everything is packed, I think." She paused. "I—I hate to say good-bye to you."

"Then don't," he said briskly. "We'll skip it. And don't worry, I'll be careful not to let anyone know where you are until I hear from you. I think you'll like it all right in Richmond, but I'm going to keep my fingers crossed. Maybe you'll be back."

"You mean you'd take me?" she asked, smiling a little shakily.

"Any time my dear," he said. "Any time. Now run along."

Mary called her a cab and cried when she left, but Margaret's regrets had to be held in check. She dared not let go even a little, for fear she'd break down altogether.

Her first move when she reached the apartment was to go to the phone, cancel her reservation for the train and wire her aunt that she was flying up. Two hours later she was on her way to the airport.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BECAUSE he couldn't think of anything else to do, when he left Margaret, Steve went back to the lab. On his way in, the switchboard operator handed him a list of calls. There were half a dozen names, among them that of Johnny Starke. Steve's lip curled as he read them. His friends. His pals. A bunch of vultures wanting a look at the body.

"I'm not in to anyone," he said to the girl. "Just tell them you don't know where I am or when I'll be back."

He went back to his own office and sat down. Twice during the afternoon he made a half-hearted attempt to do a little work. But most of the time he sat staring at nothing.

As his anger simmered down, he found he was thinking of Margaret. Remembering how startled she had been, thinking how deeply he had hurt her with his accusations. Thinking that whatever she had done, it was not for herself she had done it—it was for Kenny, or for him. Margaret was—well, it was a funny word to use about a girl, he thought, but Margaret was kind. When it wasn't love that prompted her, it was usually kindness. Like nurses, he thought. And like

mothers, more like mothers. He wondered if he was getting maudlin.

He remembered her expression there in the studio when she'd said, "Hate you? I love you, Steve." And he reached out for the telephone. As he waited for the call to go through, he glanced at his watch. It was nearly five.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Andrews," Mary said. "She's gone."

"Oh," he said. "Thanks."

He hung up and sat with his hand still on the phone. They'd planned, of course, for him to take her to dinner and to the train. He wished now he'd asked Mary when she left the studio. She might not even be home yet.

Picking up the phone again, he tried the apartment number but got no answer. But now, rather than wait, he called Mary again.

"No, Mr. Andrews," she said. "Miss Hall left here hours ago."

Somewhat puzzled, Steve hung up once more. He lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. As he did so, his door opened quietly and Johnny Starke walked in.

"Thought you might be here," Johnny said. He looked tired, his shoulders drooping even more than usual. But his manner was hearty. "Been trying to reach you all afternoon, but I couldn't get by that operator of yours. Boy, you sure have her trained!"

Steve's anger came surging back. "What do you want to see me for?" he asked, looking at Johnny coldly. "Can't you crow more decently at home? Or are you just curious to see how I'm taking it."

Without invitation, Johnny walked calmly across the little room and sat down opposite Steve. "No use taking that line, feller," he said. "Nobody's crowing. I just got through telling that meddlesome woman of mine what I thought of her behaviour and started looking for you. Told her to keep her trap shut for a change, get the kids to bed early, and see that we had a good dinner. You're going home with me."

"The hell I am. What are you trying to do, put the blame on Kate? Don't tell me you didn't know what Evelyn was up to all along."

"I knew she was after this guy Richards. Told you so when you were out at our place, remember? Kate said she was going to get him, all right. But that didn't surprise me, knowing Evelyn. It shouldn't have surprised you, either. As for the rest of it, I didn't know a damn' thing about it, and neither did Kate, for that matter." He lit his own cigarette and sat back in his chair, looking at Steve. "It was a low trick, Steve, and don't I know it! I wouldn't blame you for wringing that pretty little neck of hers—if you could reach it."

Johnny was too sincere for Steve to doubt him.

Johnny had always minded his own business, and up to today, Steve would have staked everything he had on Johnny's friendship.

"Come on," Johnny was saying. "Let's get going—I'm hungry." But he sat still, evidently waiting for Steve to make a move.

Steve had no such intention. He was in no mood to talk to Kate. And anyway, there was Margaret.

"Sorry," he said, "but thanks, anyway. I've got to see Margaret. She's leaving tonight, you know, for Connecticut."

"Correction," Johnny said, compassion in his voice. "Sorry, feller, you're just not up to date on developments. She's already left."

"She's left! But the train doesn't go until—How do you know she's left?"

"Leave it to the Starkes—the good, old busybody Starkes! Kate couldn't reach her and got worried. So she went by Margaret's apartment. No Margaret. The apartment was dark. But Kate met the landlady and same said she'd gone early. Took a plane."

Elaborately casual, Johnny got to his feet and walked over to the window which looked out on the paved court between the two ends of the building. Without turning, he said, "You might as well come on home with me. Kate'll see that a good dinner is ready for us. I'll even send her out to a movie if you want."

So Margaret was gone. Gone without a word. What was the last word she'd said to him? "I'm sorry, Steve," she'd said. And he? He couldn't remember. Whatever he'd said, he hadn't reassured her, he was certain of that. Now it would be two weeks or more before he could tell her how he felt. Face to face, that is. He could write or call her, but that was no good. He would just have to wait.

Steve thought of the evening that faced him. There was the club, where he would be sure to run into a dozen men he knew. He supposed he could go out and get drunk. And forget Margaret and Kenny and the whole mess. But the idea repelled him. He was pretty sure it wouldn't work, anyway. It would take more than that to make him forget, even temporarily. As an alternative, he had that ugly, lonely furnished room of his. He didn't think he could take it.

He looked up at Johnny's back. Patient Johnny, standing there without a word, having the decency not to look at him while he got used to Margaret's being gone.

"Okay," he said, giving in. "Okay, Johnny. Let's go." He rose, and Johnny turned back to face him again. He looked relieved. He must have been really worried about him.

Kate greeted them anxiously, almost timidly, although it was hard to recognize this expression on light-hearted, self-possessed little Kate. Ex-

cept for small sounds of activity from the dining-room, the house was quiet. Johnny looked about him inquiringly as they walked in.

"Where are the hyenas?" he asked paternally.

"In bed," Kate said. "And asleep, believe it or not."

"It's tough, but I'll try," Johnny said. "Sit down, Steve. How about a neat drink while I'm making some martinis?"

"No, thanks."

"The martinis are ready," Kate said. "I'll bring them."

"You mixed them?" her husband asked, and groaned when she admitted it. "Sorry, Steve," he said. "We'll have to drink them, I guess. Times are too hard to waste all that good vermouth."

Kate made a face at him as she went out to get the drinks. To be honest, Steve didn't know whether they were good martinis or bad martinis. He was grateful for the pleasant room, the comfortable chair, and the fact that he need not make conversation.

Murmuring something about seeing to dinner, Kate had gone out. Johnny picked up the evening paper, offering Steve half of it, but Steve refused. Instead, he leaned back and closed his eyes. Two rooms away, Kate was talking to the cook, Estelle. He could barely hear their voices. Johnny's paper rustled as he turned the pages.

And somewhere north of them, one of the big planes was droning along, taking Margaret farther away by the minute. It seemed to Steve he could hear that, too, the dull, steady roar becoming louder as he listened to it.

Johnny was standing in front of him. "Kate's about ready for us to eat, I think."

"Was I asleep?"

"Just about. Always said Kate's drinks would knock you out."

"I resent that," Kate said from the doorway. "You're looking more lively by the minute."

"Years of building up resistance," Johnny explained. "Any sign of dinner?"

"It's ready when you are."

"Then let's go."

The fact that he had had no lunch escaped Steve's memory altogether, and to his surprise he found he was hungry. On his way into the dining-room, Johnny had turned on the radio, making conversation both unnecessary and difficult. And during the pauses he told them long, rambling stories, complaining bitterly that Kate and Steve were an unappreciative audience.

Except for making sure both men had plenty to eat, Kate maintained a discreet silence. Whatever Johnny had said to his wife had most certainly taken effect.

The only time she spoke of Margaret was when Steve said good night, shortly after dinner. Both

Johnny and Kate walked with him to the door. As he opened it and turned to thank them for the dinner, Kate said, "I'm terribly sorry, Steve. Hereafter I'll mind my own business, if it kills me."

"If you don't, I will," Johnny said cryptically. But his tone was one of affection, and Kate smiled up at him.

Half-way down the long walk, Steve glanced back. They stood in the lighted doorway, close together, Johnny's arm around Kate's shoulders.

Those two had just about everything, Steve thought enviously. But most of it was their own doing, he had to admit. True, they had a nice home, a couple of cute kids and no really tough money worries, thanks to Johnny's business. But it was their own intelligence, the humour with which they seasoned their daily living together, that made their marriage a real success. He wondered if he and Margaret could do as well, or if the very intensity of their love would work against them. Perhaps that would simmer down in time, become seasoned and mellowed. Refusing to let himself think of the miserable present, he entertained himself on the way home with mental lantern-slides of his life as it would be with Margaret.

But once in his room, the events of the day would not stay pushed back—they came crowding in. With the light out, he lay in the creaky

iron bed, thinking of Kenny on his way to South America, of Margaret in Connecticut.

One of them he could do nothing about now. Perhaps never. He was ready to admit now that he had done his son a great deal of harm and little good. Evelyn and her family hadn't been good for him, that was true enough. But it was also true that, limited only by his meagre opportunities, he hadn't been good for the boy either. It was a little late to be arriving at that conclusion, he reminded himself bitterly.

But it wasn't too late to do something about the other situation. Margaret was in Connecticut, but she would be back shortly. The minute she arrived he was going to insist that they be married. There was no sense in all this postponing and waiting. What were they waiting for?

With his last waking thought, he promised himself he would marry Margaret and kill himself if necessary trying to make her happy. Margaret deserved to be happy, if anybody in this world did. Margaret deserved the best--and if he wasn't it, at least she thought he was, and he would give the best darn imitation of the best the world had ever seen . . .

It was shortly after nine the next morning that Kate called him. He hadn't been in long and was having some trouble getting down to work.

"Steve," Kate began breathlessly, "it's me, and you'll have to forgive me for meddling again,

but didn't you say Margaret would be back in two weeks?"

"Yes," Steve said. "Of course."

Now Kate sounded really unhappy. "Well, she won't. She isn't coming back."

Steve knew it was true. He had waked with the thought and dismissed it from his mind as fantastic.

"What do you mean—'isn't coming back'?" he asked, ignoring his own conviction.

"Just exactly that, Steve. I called the girl at the studio this morning to get Margaret's address so that I could write her how sorry I was about—about everything. And the girl told me."

"You mean she just said it?"

"Steve, what's the matter with you! Of course she said it. How else would I know? I asked her for Margaret's address and she told me this place—Bronston, Connecticut—where her aunt and uncle live. And then she said they were so sorry to lose Miss Hall. I said, 'What do you mean—lose her?' And she said that she's going to work somewhere else."

"But I thought you just said she was with her aunt in Connecticut."

"I did. And she is. But instead of coming back here, she's going somewhere else."

"I don't believe it." But of course he did. "Did you talk to Mr. Satterlee?"

"No. I hung up and called you."

"Thank you, Kate," he said absently. "If you'll hang up now, I'll call him and try to get the truth of all this."

Knowing perfectly well what Satterlee would say, he called the studio. Yes, Mr. Satterlee told him, it was true enough. Margaret had gone. They were very sorry to lose her. No, he regretted that he couldn't give Mr. Andrews any further information as to where she would be in the future. No doubt she would write when she was settled. No doubt she would, Steve agreed, thanking Mr. Satterlee.

He left the laboratory, walked to his car and got in. Abstractedly, he drove through the business section of town, out Peachtree Street to the smaller outlying shops and older residential section, turned down to Piedmont Avenue and again headed north. Reaching the old house in which Margaret had lived, he parked the car and went up the walk, stopping on his way to read the new sign out in front.

FOR RENT, COMFORTABLE FURNISHED APARTMENT
SINGLE PERSON ONLY. SEE MANAGER, APT. 10

No one answered when he rang the bell of Apartment 1A, and he proceeded up the stairs and down the hall to Margaret's apartment. The door was open. Inside was the woman Margaret had once pointed out to him as the owner-manager of the place. She was pushing a vacuum cleaner over the floor and supervising the work of a

coloured man who was busy scrubbing the wood-work.

Steve walked through the familiar doorway into a strange room. No vestige of Margaret remained. The mantel was bare, the draperies gone from the windows, the pictures and small lamps missing. It was a furnished room in the upheaval of a cleaning. A big, cold, ugly room—one that repelled him. It was a room he felt he had never seen before.

The woman noticed him and stopped the cleaner.

"Good morning," she said, smiling at him hopefully. "I didn't hear you come in. This thing deafens me." She pointed to the cleaner. "Are you looking for an apartment?"

"No," he said. "No, I'm wondering if Miss Hall left a forwarding address with you."

"You know," the woman said conversationally, "that's a funny thing. I was thinking this morning it was funny. She didn't. She gave a card to the mailman. At least, I think she did. But she didn't leave any address with me. Seems to me she said something about some relatives up North somewhere."

Steve nodded. It was what he had expected. He thanked her and went back to his car.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IN response to Margaret's wire and a call from New York that she would take the train out to Bronston, her aunt and uncle were waiting at the station when she arrived. They took one look at her and bundled her into the car as though she were an invalid, her uncle bristling over the way they had treated her down there in Georgia and Aunt Helen clucking solicitously. Neither of them paid the slightest attention to her reiterated assurance that she was perfectly all right.

And, to be honest, she was glad they didn't; glad to relax and let them make a fuss over her; glad they didn't ask her a lot of questions, relieved to be tucked into bed, to drink the hot chocolate Aunt Helen brought her, to have the lights turned out and be told to go to sleep now and talk in the morning.

But she was too exhausted to sleep. After they left her, she lay in the dark remembering the first night she had spent in this room. Aunt Helen and Uncle Arthur had done their best then, as now. They had brought her here from the hospital that day and told her this was to be home and this room her very own. They promised her earnestly that everything would be better in a little while. She must have been a terrible trial

to them, she thought now, grieved as they undoubtedly were. She could remember vividly the despair she felt that night, when she could see no reason for living at all. She remembered asking them why they went to so much trouble.

Now, again, she was back in this same room with a new despair to add to the memories of the old. She knew now what she had suspected all those years ago, that they were wrong—things would not be better in a little while. And once more she wondered if any of it was worth while.

But now she was seven years older. This time her nights would not be filled with nightmares and wild, frantic, waking dreams of suicide. She was resigned to living. She had made her decision. She would be sensible now—not causing anybody any trouble. She would go to Richmond and work very hard. She would think as little as possible, and in the future she would be extremely careful not to meet anyone. Of course, loving Steve as she did, there wouldn't be any danger there.

Against her will, she found herself thinking about Steve, wondering how he felt now that she had gone. It was possible that her leaving had proved a distraction, helped take his mind off losing Kenny. Of course he would miss her, too. She knew he would miss her for a while. But of course it wouldn't be the same sort of thing she

was going through. Nobody could feel about her as she did about Steve.

And in any case, he would have Linda there to take her place—more than adequately. It wouldn't be long before he forgot her altogether. And he and Linda . . . But she couldn't go on with that line of thinking. It was more than she could handle tonight. Burying her face in the pillow, she relaxed at last and cried herself to sleep.

The telephone woke her next morning. She could hear her aunt's voice. "Yes, just a minute, Operator." Then the quick steps to the foot of the stairs. "Peggy, oh, Peggy!"

Margaret got out of bed and ran to the head of the staircase.

"Atlanta is calling you, dear," Mrs. Hall said

"I'm not here, Aunt Helen," Margaret said

"Hurry, dear. It's a long distance. Somebody in Atlanta."

"Tell them I'm not here!" Margaret repeated frantically. The very thought of Steve's voice as close as the telephone there in the lower hall unnerved her.

"But, Peggy, I've already told them——" She stopped and looked around.

Half-way down the stairs, Margaret could see why. Her uncle was picking up the telephone. "It was Miss Margaret Hall you wanted? She

isn't here now." There was a pause. "No, I know, Operator. There was a slight misunderstanding. This is the Arthur Hall residence. Margaret Hall is not here. Who is calling?" Margaret was holding her breath. "I see," Arthur said. "Yes, I'll tell her."

He put the phone down and looked at his wife disapprovingly. "Why couldn't you do what the child asked, Helen? If she doesn't want to talk, she doesn't have to." He looked up the stairs. "You're to call Operator Two-seven-three, Peg, when you want to talk. They didn't give me the name. I'll write the number down for you."

"Thanks, Uncle Arthur," Margaret said gratefully. "Thanks a lot." It had been close. One more minute and she'd have been down at the phone herself.

The calls continued throughout the day, forcing Margaret to explain more of the situation than she had intended. She made it as brief as she could, trying not to listen to her aunt's protests or see her uncle's expression of grave disapproval. That evening she was glad she had told them, because Steve called and talked to Arthur Hall.

Margaret stood in the doorway to the living-room and listened while her uncle said, "Yes, Mr. Andrews . . . Yes, I know . . . She's well . . . Yes, she's okay. . . . No, I'm sorry. Peg, Margaret, that is, has asked us not to give that information to anyone." Here there was a long

silence. Margaret tried to imagine what Steve was saying, how he sounded. Finally her uncle spoke again. "Yes," he said, "yes, I can see your point. I'm not sure you're not right, too. But you understand, I'm sure, Mr. Andrews. My niece is a grown woman. She must make these decisions herself. There's not much use in our discussing it . . . Um, yes, I see . . . Well, I'll tell her. That's about all I can do . . . Yes, well . . . Good-bye."

He came back into the living-room. "That young man sounds all right to me, Peg," he said.

"Oh, he is. He's wonderful!" Margaret said quickly.

Her uncle regarded her with narrowed eyes, but he made no comment. "He wants you to get in touch with him. I promised to tell you," he said.

"I will. I'll write him tonight," Margaret said.

And she did write him. It was a stilted little note. She had realized, she told him, that it would have been a mistake for them to marry. She was going to work in another city and would never, ever, at any time, see him again. He would soon know she was right, she said, and thank her for leaving. She was sorry she'd been too big a coward to tell him before she left. She hoped he would understand. She signed it, Love, Margaret. And looking at it, she thought how pitifully inadequate the word was.

Not daring to wait, she sealed the envelope, found a stamp, and walked out to the nearest mailbox, where she mailed it. Then she returned to the house and repacked the one bag she had opened. Another day like this would defeat her.

She announced her intention of leaving when she sat down to the breakfast table next morning. And fourteen hours later, in a hotel room in Richmond, she could still hear her aunt's arguments, in which Uncle Arthur had refused to join. But by this time she had gone through so much and had begun to feel so ill, her one thought was to find a hiding-place and crawl into it. Certainly this unprepossessing room in a small hotel in Richmond seemed as good as any.

Now, she told herself, all she could do was wait for time to help her. Time - which was supposed to work miracles. It was a miracle she needed now.

Tom Colebrook offered no miracles, but his welcome when she arrived, unannounced, at the studio next day was a help. Under more normal circumstances, she might have felt considerable dismay at the appearance of the place, but on this morning she walked down the shabby side street and entered the narrow doorway without even a glance at the dusty, fly-specked pictures in the one small display window beside it. Colebrook, a big, rough-hewn, friendly man who seemed entirely alone, greeted her warmly.

"I sure can use some help," he told her, after settling her in his cluttered little office. "Fact is, business hasn't been any too good. I haven't been getting any of the children, though lord knows there're plenty of them and there's money to be made in it. I sort of figured we could build it up. Fact is, I've already started."

He was rummaging around among the accumulation of letters, bills, advertisements, blotters, and small odds and bits of paper on his desk as he talked. He grinned proudly as he handed her the object of his search. "Ran this in yesterday's paper," he said. "Of course I didn't know when you'd get here, exactly, but I figured it wouldn't do any harm."

It was a fairly large display ad in the form of an announcement. In letters that looked a foot high to Margaret, she read: MARGARET HALL . . . Her name took up the whole first line. And under it, SPECIALIST IN DISTINCTIVE BABY PORTRAITS . . . TO JOIN STAFF OF COLEBROOK STUDIO.

Margaret's first reaction was one of panic. She looked around hurriedly, as though expecting someone to walk through the open door behind her. This was to be her hiding-place!

"Don't you like it?" Colebrook asked. She realized he had been watching her curiously.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Colebrook," she said hastily. "It's fine. A good idea. I just hope the people who come are not disappointed in my work."

"They won't be," he said confidently. "If old Satterlee sticks his neck out and says you're good, you're good all right. And he told me you were plenty good!"

Margaret had recovered from her first shock. "I'll try to live up to his praise," she promised him.

On her way back to the hotel she thought the whole thing over. There was no reason to be disturbed by the publicity. Richmond was a long way from Atlanta. The chances of Kate or Steve or anybody who'd be interested seeing that particular Richmond paper was one in several million. Of course, later, when she had recovered just a little, she planned to write Kate anyway. Right now she must concentrate on finding a place to live before she actually started work.

But she couldn't concentrate. Consecutive thought seemed impossible. For the rest of the day she walked the streets of the city, standing for minutes at a time staring into shop windows and seeing nothing, fighting the sensation that she was lost in some sort of nightmare. Richmond was not a real city, she herself was not quite real. The focus on everything had slipped. She wondered apathetically if she were losing her mind, and told herself that at least she could be grateful her senses seemed too dull for her to feel much of anything.

Tom Colebrook had told her to take her time

and had given her several suggestions about apartments. But all she wanted was a furnished room. She couldn't possibly summon the energy to settle into an apartment. She passed a house not far from the studio with a sign in the window advertising a room for rent. She took it, unaware that it was bare and ugly, and not even very clean. That evening she moved from the hotel.

To her dismay, her numbed sense of unreality continued. On Tuesday she took her equipment to the studio, only to find there weren't enough appointments to keep them both busy. Tom Colebrook brought her an invitation from his wife to come to dinner, but she begged off, asking that they make it a later date. She walked. She went to shows, sitting for several hours staring at a screen and coming out without any idea of what she had seen. But gradually she began to feel things again.

It was then that Margaret made some discoveries about herself. Her capacity to hate, for instance. She hadn't been aware of it before. Margaret never really hated anybody. Now she did. She knew no other way to describe the emotion she felt. She hated Evelyn Richards. She hated Linda Howard. Hated and envied Linda, who had everything. Linda, who had—or would soon have—Steve, too. She tormented herself picturing them together. Even as she told herself how stupid it was, she continued to do it.

Jealousy, she decided, was the most horrible of all emotions, and the hardest to control.

None of it made any sense. She had left Steve of her own accord, practically forcing him on Linda, who loved him. She wanted Steve to be happy. She kept telling herself how much she wanted him to be happy. But when she thought of his being happy with Linda, she felt such a violence within her that she was frightened by it.

And then, when the violence passed, she would feel ashamed. Where was all her fine generosity? Where was all this peace and contentment that was supposed to come from the knowledge that she had done the right thing? If she was to go on feeling like this, why didn't she just give up? Why not take a plane back to Atlanta and tell Steve she wanted him, that she had to have him?

But she couldn't do that. Her reason for leaving Steve was still valid, as she knew in her saner moments. She couldn't be a complete wife for a man like Steve. She was a cripple, she reminded herself, her hand going to the old scar on her throat. And Steve must have the best—only the best. Anyway, next week things would be a little easier. And each week after that, for all the weeks there were. She kept saying it—next week, next week, next week.

Meantime, this week threatened to be endless.

Tuesday, then Wednesday, then Thursday. Thursday brought a pleading little note from Aunt Helen to come home and be taken care of. In the same mail was her closing statement of wages from Satterlee's, showing the amount withheld for income tax. And clipped to it was a sheet of memo paper on which Mary had written, "We miss you." She was considerably shaken by it.

On Friday morning when she reached the studio there was a letter from Kate, forwarded from Connecticut. She stood staring at the envelope. Forgetting that she had been gone less than a week, she was afraid to open it, afraid to read the news it might contain. With a mumbled, "Excuse me," to Tom, who had been watching her, she went to the dressing-room. Carefully closing the door behind her, she sat in the one chair and with trembling fingers tore open the envelope. Kate had written :

Dear Maggie,

Can you ever forgive me for the trouble I caused you and Steve? I'm not sure I can forgive myself. I hope, no matter how you feel about me, you'll read this anyway. All of it. Because I'm writing it for Steve—even though he doesn't know it.

He just left here, after spending practically the whole day with us, and he's a very miser-

able guy. He really needs you, you know, and I must admit I don't understand your walking out on him when you did—just when he'd lost Kenny.

Incidentally, we hashed and rehashed that situation, and I'm glad to report that Steve has finally seen the light. I told him how selfish he'd been and he admitted it. Says when they get back from S.A., he'll have a talk with Richards and see what they can do. So it looks like Kenny will be okay.

But Steve is far from it. I can imagine he said some pretty nasty things to you that day, to make you leave the way you did. But whatever they were, Maggie, if you could see him now, you'd forgive him, I'm sure. Even if you can't come back right away, why don't you write him? Do *something* about him, for the love of Pete. I was never so sorry for anybody in all my life.

Love and apologies,

Kate

Margaret sat staring helplessly at the piece of paper. It would be a long time before Steve recovered from the loss of Kenny. But if Kate knew the whole story, surely she would agree that Margaret was doing the best she could for him by staying away.

Re-reading the letter, she discovered a post

script—two postscripts—scrawled along the bottom of the page.

P.S. Johnny would send his regards if he knew I was writing you.

P.P.S. Ran into Linda and Madge at the market this morning. They asked about you. Linda wanted to be remembered.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ON Saturday morning Tom Colebrook proved himself to be a patient man. Making no reference to her sudden and inadequately explained departure of the day before, he simply asked her how she felt. Despite her appearance, which was none too good after the sleepless night Kate's letter had caused, Margaret assured him she was fine.

"Got three calls for appointments yesterday," he told her. "All babies. We'll do fine once the word gets around. You wait and see."

But little as either of them suspected it, Margaret's waiting was over. Less than an hour later, while she was in the office helping Tom straighten out some records, she heard Steve's voice.

"I'd like to see Miss Hall, please."

Margaret was standing at the big steel letter file, and she hung on to it, feeling the room go reeling around her. Colebrook looked at her anxiously.

"Miss Hall! Are you okay?"

But she never answered him. She didn't have time. The office door opened and Steve walked in. And somehow, she was never quite sure how, she was in his arms.

Colebrook was a big man and his office small

and crowded. But he vanished. Margaret neither saw him leave nor heard the door close behind him, but he was gone, and she and Steve were alone. And Margaret was crying. Clinging to Steve and crying, and behaving generally as though she'd lost her mind. Which, for the moment, she had.

Steve held her tightly until she had subsided into a series of long, sobbing sighs. Silently he handed her his handkerchief and sat her down in the nearest chair. He sat down facing her.

"You fool," he said, by way of greeting. "You crazy little fool." He was scowling at her furiously.

Margaret blew her nose. She felt light headed with happiness. There he was. Right there in front of her. She could reach out and touch him if she wanted to. "Oh, Steve," she said. She started to cry again.

"Stop it!" he said. "Not that you don't deserve to cry, after the hell you've put me through."

"You?" she asked.

"Yes, me. Who do you think? How did you suppose I'd feel when you left me like that?"

Until Kate's letter came, she had been picturing him consoling himself with Linda. Even then . . . "But I did it for you," she protested. "I — I wanted you to be happy."

"Knowing that I loved you, you left me to

make me happy," he said. "Maybe you'd better explain that a little. It doesn't seem to make much sense."

"There was Linda," she said, as though that explained everything.

"Linda?"

"Yes. I knew you could have all the things you wanted with Linda. She would be so much better for you than I."

For a long minute he looked at her. His expression was unreadable. Slowly he got to his feet and walked about the little office. Then he came and stood in front of her.

"Have you been happy these last few days?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" she cried, shocked that he should even ask it.

"And it never occurred to you that I might feel the same way?"

"No," she said. And of course it hadn't. "I thought—" she began. But in his fury, he didn't let her finish.

"You thought I was a half wit, a child, not capable of loving anyone, as you were. You thought I needed to have my life mapped out for me, to be taken by the hand and shown how I must live. You thought I had no mind of my own—and no heart either, for that matter. I wonder that you could care about the poor, weak, feeble-minded thing you thought I was!"

"Oh, Steve, it wasn't like that at all. It wasn't!"

"Then, how was it? Maybe you'd better tell me."

"It was—— Well, Kenny was gone. And I couldn't give you another son. And I knew you wouldn't be happy without children, so I ——"

"How did you know? How could you know so much better than I did myself what would make me happy! Why should you set yourself up as the only one who knows what love is? You're a fool—a conceited fool. I wonder that I love you at all!"

"Do you?"

"I—— Oh, let's get out of here!"

He threw the door open and ushered her out, tear-stained face and all. Tom Colebrook was seated at the outer desk. Afterwards, Margaret thought she must have smiled at him idiotically, but she wasn't sure. Steve said, "Miss Hall will be back."

Colebrook nodded as they marched out of the front door.

They walked for a long time—in complete silence. Finally Steve glanced at Margaret questioningly.

"Would you like something?" he asked.

"Tea? Coffee? A cocktail?"

"Yes," she said promptly. She didn't care in the least what they had, or if they had anything.

"Well, which?" he asked. But before she could reply, he turned to get a good look at her. She beamed at him, her eyes shining mistily. And Steve laughed. It was a hearty laugh, and passers-by turned to look back at them as they stood in the middle of the sidewalk. "You're a girl who is going to drive me stark, raving crazy, I'm sure," he said. He looked around, saw a shop on the next corner. "Let's go in there," he said, "and have a nice, sensible cup of coffee."

But when they were inside, seated in a booth and sipping the steaming hot coffee, Steve grew serious again.

"Look," he began, "I didn't mean all those things I said. Not quite, anyway. But there are a few things we should have understood. First—you're going to marry me and come back to Atlanta with me. Right?"

"Right," she said, her love in her eyes and in the little smile on her lips.

He opened his mouth to say something else, groaned instead, and moved around the table to kiss her. Then he returned to his place opposite her, but his hand reached out for hers and held it. "Okay," he said. "Now I love you. Do you think you can believe that if I say it often enough?"

She nodded.

He seemed satisfied. "You should at least know that love is something you can't turn on and

off at will. Don' you?" He waited for her to nod again before he continued. It was a most emphatic nod.

"The thing you don't seem to know is that you can't arrange life neatly—like the stories you read when you were a kid, where the hero married the heroine and they lived happily ever after. Life just doesn't work that way. There aren't any 'endings'. There isn't any point where you can stop and say, 'This is the happy ending. From here on, everybody is happy for the rest of their lives.' Because, in real life, each ending is really a beginning. Maybe you solve something, maybe you don't. But you go right on to something else.

"You and I are people who should get married and have a flock of kids. That would be our kind of happy ending. So all right, this isn't a story and that isn't the way it's going to be. We can't have the kids. Lots of people get married and find they can't have children. And maybe they're unhappy about it. But they aren't nearly so unhappy as they would be if they didn't have each other. And if they want children badly enough, there are plenty of 'em already in the world who want parents just as much."

"You mean we could adopt some?"

"If we want to. Of course. Why not? The point is, whatever the solution to that question, love each other and it is our problem—one we can work out together. Right?"

"Right," she said promptly.

He had both her hands now and the coffee had been forgotten.

"Steve," she asked, "what about Kenny?"

"Kenny? He's a problem we can't do much about right now. Or for the next couple of years. We'll face that one, too, when the time comes." For the first time, he hesitated. "I've done some thinking about that," he admitted, "and I can see now I wasn't doing him much good as things were. If Richards is as good a guy as I've heard, maybe this was the best thing for Kenny. If it is, I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

"We can tell by the time they get back," Margaret said.

"Yes," he said "we can tell then. But right now-- where do you want to get married?"

"I-- - Could we go home? To Connecticut, I mean?"

"Sure. Why not? I'd like a few words with that uncle of yours. Of all the close-mouthed -- "

Margaret laughed. "Don't blame him. It was my fault."

He shook his head at her solemnly. "It certainly was. Don't ever-- -"

"I won't!" she promised hastily. "How did you find me, Steve?"

"The ad Colebrook ran," he said. "He sent a copy to Satterlee, and Mary showed it to me."

Good old Colebrook. Let's go back there so I can thank him and refund the money he spent for it."

Margaret Andrews sat before the dressing-table smiling into the mirror at her own reflection. To-day might be the end of their honeymoon, but that only meant tomorrow was the beginning of their marriage, the real beginning. She was so happy—so incredibly, unbelievably happy.

The door to the bathroom was closed, but through it she could hear Steve whistling. With the little smile still on her lips, she picked up her puff and dipped it into the box of powder. The dress she was wearing was cut low at the neckline. With a dress like that, she had to be particularly careful of . . . particularly . . . careful . . .

Dropping the powder puff, she stared into the mirror. *Where was it?* There must be something wrong with the lighting—she couldn't see it at all.

She leaned forward, turning her head a little to the side and at the same time tracing a familiar pattern along her throat with her left hand.

"Steve!" she called suddenly. "Steve!"

He came running, a bottle of after-shave lotion in his hand. "What is it, darling? What happened?"

"It's gone, Steve. I can't find it. I don't see it at all!"

"What? What's gone?"

"My scar. It's gone." She tipped her head to the right, looking up at him, still with her hand covering her throat, as though not daring to let her look.

"Oh, that!" he said. "Here, wait, let me see." He leaned over her, gently moving her hand so that the threadlike white line that lay along the little crease in her neck was exposed.

"Of course," he said, smiling down at her. "Of course it's gone."

"But don't be ridiculous, Steven. It's not gone. It's just—just—disappeared. That's all. That's all that!"

"You saw for yourself it had," he reminded her. "And why not?"

"But—but—*how*?"

"Lean over once more and I'll show you," he said, sliding on to the bench beside her.

Once more she held her head to one side, watching him in the big mirror as he bent toward her. "Like this," he said. "Watch closely now. Just like this." He kissed her throat, just below her left ear. With his lips, he followed the line her fingers had made so many times.

When was it that she had hoped for a miracle?

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